

# Going Nowhere by Joshua Eyre

## A note from the author:

The document you hold before you is unfinished. Not only is it completely unedited, but it is also only half finished, with only 25,000 of the final 50,000 word count. That is because this book is a work in progress, yet I feel the need to let people read it as it was written as part of a challenge between me and my friends to complete 25,000 words in one month. So I hope you enjoy it despite its errors, and to those who do end up enjoying it, I assure you that I will finish it.

If you have any comments or corrections, please feel free to contact me at  
[newdraftpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:newdraftpodcast@gmail.com)

Also, the title is a work in progress, let me know if it sucks. Now go ahead and get reading.

# Act 1 - Denial

## Chapter 1

We sat across from each other as we waited. I had the afternoon off, and Charlie was between places at the moment, so we had the luxury of sitting in a cafe at 1 o'clock on a Friday. So she sipped at coffee, I stuffed a scone in my face, and we attempted to chat our problems away.

"When did you get that, Brian?" She said abruptly, setting her cup down with a carelessness that caused its contents to slosh. With just as much gusto she pulled my jacket off of the back of my chair. She threw it over her shoulders and mockingly showed it off to me.

"Very slick," She giggled. It looked odd on her, but not in a bad way. The black leather contrasted the myriad of colors that covered the rest of her.

"I've had it for ages. Pulled it out of the closet on a whim," I said, chuckling along. She sat back down, with it still draped over her.

"It's still the start of Autumn. It's not even cold."

"Better safe than sorry."

"If you say so," she said with a grin I couldn't help but reciprocate. She took another gulp of coffee.

"So what do you wanna do tonight?"

"Hell if I know. You got any ideas."

"Oh god, don't make me choose!"

"We can just hang out at mine, watch a movie or something." I mused before taking another bite out of my scone.

"Good enough for me, it's not like I really have the cash to be going anywhere anyway."

"Like that would stop you." Now it was my turn to grin. Charlie was the epitome of the life of the party. The sort who brought out the crazy side in people. It meant we made quite the dynamic duo, the fiery woman willing to do anything, and the quiet out-of-towner. She brought me out of my shell.

She had been just about the first person I had met when I moved to town, and now she was easily my best friend. She had been going through some shit lately though. She lost her job when the store she worked at had closed, and was still looking. But she was still as positive as ever, and so I endeavored to be as positive as I could, too. It didn't come naturally.

"Well," She said as she drained her cup, "let's get going then."

"You have any idea what we should watch?" I said as I stood up.

"We'll think of something"

I stood up and choked down the last of my scone. We began to walk off towards my place, away from the little cafe, past all manner of shops and offices. Streets filled with people. Buildings filled with people. Sometimes I forget how big this place is. I've lived in big cities all my life, but sometimes you forget exactly how many people there are around you all the time.

After a few blocks of people watching we ended up outside my apartment building, but as I reached to open the door, I heard the ring of my phone. Charlie, still wearing my jacket, pulled it out of the pocket and answered. I offered an outstretched hand as she continued to speak into it.

“Hello, this is Brian’s phone, who is it?”

She listened for a moment, and then that joking smile turned. Suddenly the phone was in my open hand, and Charlie had a look of worry that was uncommon for her. Whatever was on the other end of the line was serious. I gulped as I moved the phone to my ear.

“Hello, this is Brian.”

The woman on the other end sobbed. A voice I recognised, but had not heard in a long time spoke.

“Hello Brian, this is Sonia, I don’t know if you remember me, I’m...” I cut her off.

“I remember, you’re Max’s mother.” There was a cry of recognition as I said his name.

Max had been just about my only friend throughout high school, and all the way up until I left Detroit. We shared many things, but the one thing that mattered was that we both wanted out. We had wanted to escape that dirty inner city we grew up in. Now here I was, sitting in cafes half a country away.

We were meant to have left together. That was the plan up until the last moment, too. We had just finished up with high school, and headed off to college. But then Max’s father got sick, and Max decided he had to stay. He told me I should go, and that he would be right behind me. ‘Just until he’s better,’ he said. But then his father died, and Max had been in charge of the family business ever since. We kept in touch, but it wasn’t the same.

“I’m sorry, but...”

“Don’t worry Sonia, you don’t have to say it. I’m so sorry for you’re loss.”

For a moment, both sides of the line were silent, and all I could hear was the city behind me.

“May I ask how it happened?”

“He was working, and a man in a... a mask came in and he...”

I never should have left.

“She couldn’t finish her sentence, and eventually, she just moved on from the question. I never should have asked it, it brought the both of us nothing but pain.

“The funeral is on Monday, at 11. If you want to come of course.” She was speaking with a little more strength now. This was something she could control, and that brought her comfort.

“I’ll be there.”

“You still know where the local funeral home is?”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll see you then.”

Goodbye Brian” she said softly, before hang up the phone.

I stood staring at the phone for a moment, sitting in the palm of my hand, before I finally looked up at Charlie, realising for the first time since the phone touched my ear that she was here. Apparently one half of the conversation was enough for her to get an idea of what I had just found out. She stepped over and opened the door to my apartment building, and ushered me into the lobby. It hadn’t been cold, but now I was shivering. Without a word, Charlie threw my jacket over my back.

"I don't think I can do movie night tonight. I have a funeral to get to."

"You can't go by yourself, you're a wreck already. I'll drive you, my car is just around the corner."

"It's like 250 miles, you can't drive it."

"It's not like I'm doing anything else at the moment. And anyway, how else are you going to get there?"

"I don't know, I don't know."

"Look, I know this sucks, but I'm here to help, dude."

On one hand, I just wanted to be alone. It felt like everything in the world sucked, and I just wanted to not care. Charlie was right though. I couldn't just crawl up into a ball and block out the world.

"Fine, we'll drive."

"There we go. Come on, let's go upstairs and get you some stuff so we can get going."

"Yeah," I said as I pressed the button for the elevator. I would be glad to get out of this town, the town I had left my friend for.

## Chapter 2

While Brian was usually a rather quiet person, I had never seen him like this. It was his eyes. Usually they were all over the place, looking and probing, but now they just sat looking forward. When he was looking around, you could tell he was paying attention, but now he was almost like a zombie. Things were still ticking over in his head, and they would be for a while.

I stood in the doorway, waiting for him. He packed his things into a backpack, on after another. He never stopped to look at exactly what it was. He could have been bringing a dozen shirts and no pants for all I knew. Everything that went in the bag looked just like what he was wearing now, dark. Blue and black, that matched his hair while contrasting his skin, which was even paler than usual.

Eventually, he came back to the door, with a backpack and a suit in a bag draped over his arm. I took the backpack from him and slung it over my shoulder.

“Come on, we’ll just swing by my place and pick up some stuff, then we’ll get on the road”

“One second,” Brian suddenly said, half out the door. He thrust the suit on me, and ran back into his apartment. A moment later, he emerged, carrying a folder full of CDs.

“We need music for a road trip right,” he said with a faint smile. He’s the sort of person to keep making jokes, even while on the verge of breaking down. He took the suit back, and balanced it on his forearm, leaving both hands free to flip through the collection.

“You know, Max originally gave me this thing,” he confided a few flights into our decent down his building. “He probably gave me half of these.”

I didn’t know how to respond. I was the one you went to when things were going well, not when things were falling down around you. I wanted to be supportive. I wanted to help him, but I didn’t even know how to help myself. Yet I tried.

“Only half? I’m surprised, the way you talk about him, he was some sort of musical god.”

“Yeah, he was a wizard with a guitar. To be honest, I was always jealous of him, so bloody talented. Always got all the girls, too.” Then he chuckled, as he flicked to the next CD in the case. Chuckles I was used to, I could deal with. I let me know that maybe he was going to be alright at the end of this. With that hope, we walked out onto the street, and out to my car.

It was beat up old thing, that i had gotten second hand, but the old girl hadn’t failed me yet. It was about the only thing of value I had left.

We threw his stuff in the back of the car and got in. His flicking had stopped and he had settled on an album, Rubber Factory by the Black Keys. He threw it into my car’s shitty radio and hit play. We didn’t say a word as we drove, be just sang, until eventually we were in front of my parents place.

“Hey, just stay here, I’ll be right back.” I didn’t want anyone coming in. It was bad enough that I was back here after being kicked to the curb by my job, I didn’t want anyone looking in on my shame. So I bounded up the stairs alone and unlocked the door.”

“Hey ma, I’m home!”

"Oh, hey Charlie, I'm in the kitchen." I popped my head in through the door and saw her standing there cutting carrots. "I'm making stew."

"Oh, sorry Ma, I'm not going to be here. I'm going to be gone for a few day's actually. You see, one of Brian's old high school friend's died, and I'm driving him to the funeral."

"Oh, that poor dear. We'll you give him my love won't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course."

"And I'll be sure to save you some stew," she called after me as I walked down the hall to my childhood bedroom.

I opened the door and took in the nostalgic horror that stood in front of me. When I moved out, my parents hadn't really done anything with my room, and when I ended up back here I didn't bother doing anything either. So it stood, a shrine to my youth, walls covered in the faces of whatever celebrity crushes were in vogue when I was a teenage girl.

I fished through the closet for a few things to wear, stuffing them into an old shoulder bag. If I was being honest, I was glad to get out of that house for a while, away from my life and the fact that I had no idea what I was doing. I looked into the mirror hanging on my wall and sighed. Looking back at me was a nervous looking woman, with auburn hair and glasses who sighed as well.

I walked back out, past my mother who said a quick goodbye, and finally arrived back at my car. Brian had changed the disc again, having run out of his last pick. Them Crooked Vultures blared as I got into the car and pulled out of my park. He grabbed the map as I put my foot down, and like that we were gone.

# Chapter 3

We drove along, repeating the same acts, over and over. As Charlie drove, we sang. Occasionally there would be a lull in the music, which I would fill with some little story. As the Arctic Monkeys blared from the stereo, I spoke.

"I remember, the first time me and Max drank, I got so wasted I could hardly stand. He had no idea what to do, so he dragged me back to his house and snuck me into the bathroom. I spent the next hour vomiting, while he tried to play this album as loud as he could so his parents wouldn't hear."

"Well did you get caught?" Charlie questioned.

"No, surprisingly. I guess to his parents we were just playing it as loud as we always did." I chuckled as I remembered.

The stories continued to flow out of me as I remembered. How we had listened to this song at our first party, and how that song was the first he had learnt to play on guitar. Then, I would flick through the folder once again, and pick out a new CD, starting the cycle all over again.

A few repetitions in, and I was beginning to feel myself again. While the thought of what had happened still sat at the back of my mind, it was no longer all encompassing. The stories flowed more readily. The two of us began to laugh along to the tales more, as the mood started to lighten.

The car chugged along as we pasted road sign after road sign, until it didn't. With a sputter, it began to slow. Charlie cursed under her breath, pulling to the side of the road. When we finally rolled to a stop, she slammed her head into the steering wheel, letting the horn blare for a few seconds before looking up at me.

"Welp, we're boned," she stated manically.

"Come on, you look under the hood, I'll give someone a call."

"Yeah, I'd rather not be stuck in the middle of nowhere."

We simultaneously stepped out of what now seemed like just a pile of scrap metal. I looked around and saw nothing but open plains and open road. Not a single other car was in sight down the asphalt that stretched in both directions. In the distance I could see trees, but that was it. This place was calm in a way I had never experienced before.

I sat down on the grass next to our car and pulled out my phone. Luckily I still had some reception, so civilisation cannot have been too far away. I began to search for where we were, and who the closest mechanic was.

As my searches slowly loaded, Charlie checked under the bonnet of the car. She fiddled with things within for a few moment before standing up straight with a puzzled look.

"I have no idea what's wrong," she declared

"One sec," I replied, letting my phone finally finish loading. "I have the number of a mechanic with a tow truck."

"Good, I don't think I want to be out here when it gets dark."

So I dialled the number I had found, and was greeted by a deep voice that sounded friendly but tired.

“Hey, Easthedge Automotive, how can I help you.”

“Um, hi. My car just broke down and I’m about 20 minutes out of town. I was hoping I could get a tow.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. I’ll be there in a tick, just sit tight.” He said, and with that he hung up the phone.

I put my phone away and laid back on the grass, getting ready to wait for the abrupt man on the other end of the phone. Charlie, sick of looking at the car sat next to me and laid back.

“So where are we anyway?” She asked.

“Apparently, we are a little outside of Easthedge,” I replied, as I pointed in the direction that the map said the town was in.

“I don’t know where that is.”

“Neither do I.”

“So what do you want to do while we wait?”

“I don’t know… I spy?”

“Fine, you start.”

“I spy with my little eye, something beginning with T.”

She sat up and looked around for a moment, taking in the surroundings. She finally replied with a look of boredom.

“It’s tree isn’t it.”

“Yup, your turn.”

“I don’t think we can play this game anymore,” she said looking down at me.

“Why?”

“Cause there’s nothing here!” She shouted before falling back into the grass once more. She was right. Though the landscape around us may have been beautiful, there wasn’t much variety to it. We laid in it’s silence for a moment before she broke it again.

“I’m sorry, Brian.”

“Huh?”

“If you had of gone alone, taken a bus or something, we wouldn’t be stuck here.”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s not your fault that your car is a piece of shit.” That made her laugh, but it was a different laugh than her normal one. Usually it was light and fun, but this one was guttural. It was a laugh of resignation.

“I wonder what Easthedge is like. If we’re going to be stuck in it, I hope it isn’t a shithole.” She said as her laughter died.

“Don’t worry, we won’t be stuck there long,” I reassured her. “We’ll make it by Monday, of that I’m sure.” I was trying to reassure myself just as much as her. The wrestled to keep the thoughts at the back of my mind from flaring. I hoped that I would not fail to be there for Max this time, and as I did a tow truck come over the horizon.

## Chapter 4

As if by magic, just as Brian reassured me we would be fine, the tow truck pulled up behind my car, and out of it stepped an immensely tall man. He was all muscle, sheathed in greasy overalls, a shaven face and a clean hair cut. He looked like the sort of man who always knew what he was doing. He walked up to the two of us as we stood up and began to speak.

"You would be the two I'm looking for then," He said with an offered hand. We shook it one after the other before he quickly turned his back on us to look at the car.

"Well, we'll drag her into town and I'll see what's wrong." As he said it, he looked down at his watch, and then hurried off towards the back of his truck and began dealing with the business of hauling the car up onto it's back.

As he worked, he hollered over. "Hop on in the truck if you want. I won't be long." We looked at each other. Our new acquaintance was an erratic one. He seemed to always need to be doing something, and it made our lack of things to do stand out even more. We happily took the offer to remove ourselves from the situation.

We sat next to each other in the cab of the truck, uncomfortably close. We heard as the mechanic began to hoist the car up, and suddenly he had joined us up front.

"Okay, let's get us back to town then"

All at once the heft of the truck lurched forward, and we were away. Where before I had been so focused on the road, and on Brian's stories, our break had given me time to soak in my surroundings. I stared out the windows, at the greens and blues, that slowly changed. It crept up slowly, just a few farmhouses at a time, but then there was a sign. 'Easthedge. Population: 6,590.' From there, buildings became more regular.

"I just realised, I didn't introduce myself," The mechanic said suddenly, never taking his eyes off of the road. "I'm William, but everyone calls me Bill," and with that he presented his hand once again.

"Brian." He quickly took his hand, looking worriedly at the steering wheel.

"Hi Bill, I'm Charlotte, but you can call me Charlie." I took his hand quickly, with the same look Brian had.

Bill put his hand back on the wheel. "Will do Charlie. It is a pleasure to meet the both of you, welcome to Easthedge."

Now we came upon a small row of stores and buildings that made up the small town's main street. A little way down it, we pulled into a garage, that said in big faded letters above it, 'Easthedge Automotive'. We jerked to a stop and Bill swung out of the driver's seat.

He looked up at the clock on the workshop's wall. The hands sat at 5:15. Suddenly he rushed to the back of his truck, and began setting the car down. He turned towards us and spoke.

"I'm sorry, but this is going to have to wait 'til Monday. I've got to go."

"Wait, what?" Brian exclaimed.

"My wife, Carla, she's waiting for me."

"What about tomorrow?"

"It's our wedding anniversary tomorrow. I sorry, but I won't be able to come in and take a look at your car."

"But..." Brian paused for a moment, looking at the his shoes.

"Just tell him, maybe he will understand," I whispered to Brian. He looked up at Bill.

"I hope you have a great time tomorrow," he said with a look of defeat. "We'll just grab our stuff out of the car. See you on Monday."

"Thanks for understanding. Don't worry, the town is lovely, you'll love it."

"Is there somewhere we can stay?" I asked as Brian fished around inside the car.

"Yeah, the pub has some rooms that it rents out. Just talk to Margaret, she'll get you all set. And tell her I sent ya."

Brian walked over to me and handed me my bag. On his back was his backpack and in his arms was that folder of CDs. It was like he couldn't stand to lose sight of it.

"And I guess I should ask now, how much is it going to be?" I motioned my head towards my car. He looked over at it, thinking.

"I haven't really had a look yet, but I would say about a thousand all up to look at it." My stomach clenched. There went the last of my savings. I nodded and began to walk towards the garage's exit. Brian followed.

"We'll, see you around Bill," I said, trying to keep my face in a position that didn't show my worry. I didn't know how I was going to survive the next two days.

## Chapter 5

We walked down the main street of the town, and for the first time I really take in my surroundings. The road was narrow but the footpath was wide, with little planters next to the street. Flowers bloomed, safe in there boxes, cared for by someone. Eventually, we came to a box being tended to by a woman, and I locked eyes with her as she watered lavenders. She looked motherly as she smiled up at me.

“Good Evening,” She said hospitably as we got close enough.

Charlie had been staring in the opposite direction, at the various landmarks of the town. She looked like she was just letting her weight carry her forward as her eyes darted around. The words snapped Charlie back to reality.

“Evening,” I responded. “Were looking for the pub, could you help us out?”

“New to town are you?” She said slyly. She stood up and put her watering can down.

“Yeah, how can you tell?”

“Well if you have to ask, you probably haven’t been here long. It’s just down there, straight ahead. You’ll know it when you see it. And just a hint, the same directions apply to just about everything in this town.”

“Thanks for that,” Charlie said. “I’m sure it will come in handy.”

“No problem, honey. Tell’em Laura sent you.”

“We’ll, see you around Laura.” Charlie said as she and I began to walk away.

“I didn’t catch your names,” she called after us.

“Charlie,” She called back.

“Brian,” I called too.

She waved goodbye to us, as we continued our walk towards the pub. As we walked, I looked back over my shoulder. Laura picked up her watering can, and headed back inside the building across from the flower pots. Just before she closed the door, she peeked out and caught my eyes again. She shut the door suddenly, and I swivelled my head back to look forward just as quickly.

“As friendly as the people around here are, they give me the creeps,” I confided in Charlie. Suddenly, I noticed that I could see the silhouettes of people peering out of houses and shops. They would look at us for a moment, and then retreat into the shadows, and suddenly a new set of shades emerged from the next building down.

“Their curious about the out-of-towners. Just ignore them and they’ll get over it,” she said looking around. We came across an ancient looking place, with a sign that said, ‘The Lazy Crook’. “Anyway, where here. You’ll forget all about it when you get a few drinks in you. The weekend will fly by, you’ll see.” Like that, I was pushed through the door, and in the dark, warm embrace of Easthedge’s local.

The air felt heavy inside. It filled my lungs with a lethargic warmth that matched the rest of the bar’s appeal. A few heads popped up from whatever conversation their owner was having to look at us, the newcomers who were encroaching on their space, but most didn’t move from looking down into their pints. As we walked over to the bar, I returned a few of those glances,

and found that the Lazy Crook's regulars shied from it. You would have thought that they would be the one who wouldn't mind the attention. They were surrounded by friends, while me and Charlie were just plain old surrounded. Yet, I like the distraction of people watching, and so I was the one who kept on looking.

After what felt like a week, we reached the bar and were face to face with its tender. She looked like she had been born in the place, in her loose black dress and leather jacket. Her dirty blond hair pulled back into a ponytail to keep it out of her eyes and the drinks. With a look of amusement on her face she looked us over.

"New in town, huh. That makes you two the only people in this whole place I can't make the usual for. What are you having?"

"Gin and tonic," Charlie said after a moment's thought.

"And I'll have a rum and coke, thanks," I quickly followed.

She swiftly began pouring as she continued to chatter. We introduced ourselves for the third time, sure that it wouldn't be the last time we offered our names to a stranger today. She replied in kind.

"Margaret," she named herself as I handed over a wadded up bill, "and I assume that the two of you aren't just here to drink."

"Yeah, we need a place to stay while Bill works on our car," I responded. "He told us to tell you he sent us. Come to think of it, so did Laura."

"Should only be a couple of nights," Charlie added.

"Well, a room is a hundred a night, but seeing as you've already meet the town gossip, I'll knock a tenner off."

Charlie looked worriedly at me for a moment before she turned back to Margaret to speak. "If you don't mind, we'll have a think about it while we finish these." She picked up the glasses, now filled to the brim.

"No problem, I'm not going anywhere," Margaret said with a shrug. With that, Charlie was off, hurrying to a booth on the other side of the room. While she wasn't dragging me over with her, the looking in her eyes as she looked back at me made me feel like she was.

## Chapter 6

As soon as I sat down, I took a gulp from one of the glasses in my hand. Brian sat opposite me with a quizzical look on his face. I handed him his glass, and set mine down in front of me. I sighed as I began to speak.

"Look, getting the car fixed ain't going to be cheap, and I'm not exactly rolling in dough right now." I wiped my brow as I continued. "I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to come up the cash for the room. Hell I'm not even sure I'm going to be able to pay Bill."

"While I can help with the car, I see your point. But what other option do we really have? Can't sleep in the car, it's locked in Bill's garage. Can't sleep on the street, 'cause I don't think that the people round here would take to kindly to that, not to mention the cold."

"Well, I do have an idea." I looked around at the others sitting in this bar. Occasionally, an eye would turn to us, only to dart away when they noticed that I was looking back. Margaret had mentioned that Laura was some sort of gossip queen, and she was right. In the five minutes it had taken us to walk from her and her lovely flowers to here, she had managed to let the entire pub know that there was new blood in town. The attention was new, but it wasn't unwanted. If they wanted to look, let them look.

"Notice how everyone is staring?"

"Yeah, how could you not notice?" Brian ducked down like it would hide him from their gaze.

"Well we have Laura to thank for that, and perhaps we can use it to our advantage. You see, you're an out of towner, a city boy, fancy and suave. I'm sure there is someone in here who is just dying to talk to you, to find out more. If things end up going a little further, well then problem solved, you have a bed for the night."

"Not to mention any of the other reasons why that is a horrible plan, but fancy and suave? Have you meet me?"

"Yes, Brian, I have meet you, but the point is that they haven't. I know it is a little messed up, but what's the harm in trying, huh. We are here for a while, may as well get to know someone. You might end up actually liking them."

Brian poked his head out of the booth for a moment before returning to a sip of his rum and coke. He closed his eyes and rubbed them for a moment before he muttered, "Fine, just help me pick who."

"That was a lot easier than I expected."

"Well, I'm not really in a mood to argue."

I stood up at the booth and looked around. The abruptness of my standing had drawn even more eyes than whatever rumors Laura had spread did. It conveniently meant that for a few seconds every face in the bar was pointed at me. That's when I spotted her. I sat with a thump and leaned in closer to Brian.

"Back left corner, wearing the grungy t-shirt and blue jeans."

He poked his head out again, scouting for the woman I was describing. "With the long black hair?"

"Yeah, that's her. She has that doesn't care look that you seem to like so much."

"I will admit, you do know my type and not caring is exactly what I'm looking for right now."

"Exactly, now go get em tiger."

"Wait, what about you," he said as he stood up from the booth, downing his drink.

"Well you can't rush these things, I'm going to have a look around, check my options."

"What, why can't I do that?"

"You're already standing," I said with a grin. He sighed and began to wander off. Before he got out of earshot, I told him, "And ask her what it is that Laura has been telling everyone about us."

He turned and grumbled a yes. As he turned back, his posture changed. He straightened up as he she came into view I'm sure. I knew she was his type. But now I was all alone at the booth. I continued to sip on my gin and tonic, trying to drum up the nerves that Brian had just shown off. I poked my head out of the booth occasionally, trying to build the courage to approach any one of the bar's many patrons, but each time I retreated back to the safety of my seat.

Eventually, I decided that I would take my own advice. You can't rush these things. I would go for a walk, get the blood pumping, and then I would come back into the Lazy Crook ready to pounce. I tried to convince myself that this wasn't just chickening out as I stood up, grabbed my bag and walked towards the door. As I walked, I noticed that Brian didn't even look up from his conversation. I smiled as walked out the door into the night's cold air.

When we had come in, there was still a little bit of light in the sky, but now it was gone. I had lived in the city all my life, where even night hadn't really meant darkness. I was used to midnights dotted with street lights, but here there was almost nothing. The occasional light shining through a window was all that there was, and so I walked by moonlight.

I looked around me, unsure of where I was, or where to go. I remembered Laura's directions, and just started walking.

# Chapter 7

11 steps. That's how many it took to get across the Lazy Crook. I know because I counted. With each step a part of my mind rebelled. It tried to compel me to turn around and take a step in the other direction, a lot more than 11 steps if possible. But there was another part of me, that part that controlled my legs apparently, that kept my pace. If that part had a voice, it would have told me about how I may as well keep going, that this was going to pass, just like everything else. So, after 11 painful steps, I found myself looking down at a woman who looked at me like I was nothing. In that moment, all I could think was, 'you still have a chance, run.' Instead I opened my mouth.

"Hey, uh, you mind if I take a seat?"

She shrugged and motioned to the empty chair sitting across from her. "Sure, why not."

I sat in the chair, and I was locked in. Every part of me that had been telling me to run was now focused on one thing, trying not to look like an idiot. As I racked my brain for something, anything to say, I realised that Charlie had given me the ultimate icebreaker.

"So what has Laura been telling everyone about us anyway?"

She chuckled for a moment, before stifling it enough to answer. "By the time it got to me, the story was that you two were secret agents here to crack down on some secret underground cartel here in town."

"How do you know that isn't true?"

"They also said that you were 7 foot 3."

I looked myself up and down. "I wouldn't call myself short, but I'm definitely not that tall. Damn gossips, how is a secret agent meant to get any respect when they are going around telling everyone these blatant lies."

"Don't be too offended, I don't think I've heard Laura tell the truth in all the time that I have been in Easthedge. So what's you're name agent?"

"Brian."

"Brian... not the most secret agent-y, but I like it none the less. I'm Morgan."

"We'll it's nice to meet you Morgan. So how long have you been living in Easthedge anyway?"

"No, no, you already asked a question, it's my turn."

"Since when is that how it works?"

"Since always. The people in this town, they just talk and talk and talk. It's infuriating, and there's no way I'm letting you get away with it too. You see, this way, we both learn a little something."

"Well what do you want to know? I'm new to town, so I don't think that I know much of anything."

"That's even better though. Everything in this town is old news. You can only deal with old biddies trading gossip and old coots talking about find buried treasure for so long. The occasional outsider we get is more interesting than just about everyone in Easthedge combined. So tell me, what do you do for fun?"

"I listen to a lot of music. The live music scene back home is pretty vibrant, so most nights I tend to end up at some bar, listening to some kids playing their latest masterpiece to a crowd of me and about 7 other people."

"See, we don't have anything like that here. As much as I love music, it's CD or bust here. Do you play?"

I tried to delay. It was a question that reminded me that reality wasn't me talking to cool women I met in strange bars, but I wanted to hang onto that reality for as long as I could. "What happened to alternating questions?"

"I've lived here my whole life. There, I answered your question, and now it's my turn again. Do you play?"

"No" I answered. "A friend tried to teach me, but it never stuck. Maybe I'll try again, who knows."

"That's cool, neither can I. It takes to much patience, to learn I mean. I've never been gifted with an abundant amount of patience."

I was relieved that she hadn't pushed it, but maybe that was just because I was paranoid. I waited a second for her to speak again, but she very quickly broke our silence.

"It's your turn to ask a question."

"Oh, you aren't just going to ask one anyway?"

"I wasn't, but you just asked a question, so it's my turn again." Her grin was massive, and her eyes lit up as she outwitted me. "And my question is... do you want a drink?"

"Sure"

She waved her hand around in the air violently as she beckoned to Margaret. "Hey Marge! Marge! Sis!"

"What?" Margaret called back, staring daggers at Morgan.

"Could I get another vodka and raspberry, and could Brian get a...?" She trailed off looking at me questioningly. I turned to Margaret to tell her my order, hoping that the expression on my face conveyed that I was sorry and embarrassed at the same time.

"A...a rum and coke, please."

Margaret sighed. "Fine."

I turned back to Morgan to continue our little game, and as I did, I noticed that Charlie was gone. I wasn't worried.

# Chapter 8

I braced myself against the cold of the night air as I began to stroll down the main street. In the dark, the idyllic town seemed to turn. Every corner became the perfect hiding place for some unknown terror. Yet, I felt safe as I walked down the pavement in the shadows, as it appeared as though I was the only living person for miles. Eventually, my movement warmed me up, and I began to feel that perhaps I had walked enough. Before I could turn and head back to the Lazy Crook however, I saw a light in the distance, pouring out of one of the buildings towards the end of Easthedge's main strip.

I decided that the light wasn't that much further. The pub could wait. I continued to put one foot in front of the other, until I was finally standing in front of a small church. Outside of its doors stood an old man, bathed in the light coming from within. He sat on the steps smoking a cigarette, all in black except his white collar.

"Hello there," he said as he straightened up. I looked to my left and right confused about what I was seeing.

"Yes, you. You are the only one around after all."

"Sorry, just... this is rather weird for me."

"I suppose so. Went for a walk and the only other living thing in sight is a priest."

"Exactly."

"We'll you're new to town, everything's going to seem a little weird at first. Especially if you start listening to the rumors Laura starts spreading about you."

"Okay, what on earth has Laura been saying about me?"

"Oh, no idea, I just know Laura is all. She's nice enough, but she has a bit too vivid an imagination."

I looked back in the direction of the bar. If I was going to invoke my brilliant plan, I really had to head back, but on the other hand the priest sitting in front of me might have been the most normal person I had run into since I left home. I could always go back a little later, after all, Margaret said she wasn't going anywhere. I walked up and sat down on the step next to the balding man and offered a hand.

"I'm Charlie, nice to meet you."

"You've done this a lot today, haven't you?"

"Too many times if you ask me."

"Well I'm Father Martin, and I can tell you, that this won't be the last time you do introduce yourself," he said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. I'm definitely getting that feeling," I replied with a sigh.

"So what brings you to town Charlie?"

"Well, my car broke down. As for why I was passing through, well, that's my friend's business, I think. Personal, you know. I just hope he's going to be okay at the end of this"

"I see, I won't pry then. But I will ask a follow up. What are you doing wandering the streets at this time of night?"

"Nothing better to do, nowhere better to go."

"Well would you like to see the inside of the church then? It's interesting enough to kill a little bit of time at least."

Again I stared back in the direction I had come. "Sure, why not?" It was an excuse not to go through with my idea, which I was starting to realise was an extremely stupid one. We both stood up and headed through the open door, into the light.

He began to guide me around the stone building. It was small but cozy, and felt well loved. The Father explained that the people of the town didn't really have a particular denomination, but rather that the small church was simply a place where they could gather and keep close with one another, and how that suited him nicely. We walked around the wall, and he showed me the murals on one and the stained glass on another. Finally we reached a curious looking plaque, that had been fastened to the wall with a crude engraving on it.

"What is this?" I enquired of the strange thing. It had a scratchy drawing of a tree on it. Martin laughed at the question before bending down to take a closer look at the carving.

"They say of the town's mayors, a long while ago, buried his fortune rather than let his spoilt children have it. He put these silly clues up all over town. There are drawings like this all over town. I like it though, adds a bit of charm to the place."

As we wandered towards the door once again, Father Martin turned to me. "So when are you going to ask?"

I looked towards the door, before swallowing a frog in my throat. "Would you mind if I stay the night here, Father?"

"No problem, there is a spare room, I show you it. See, that wasn't so hard, was it."

As much as Martin being a know-it-all was annoying, I had to admit to myself that it was nice to be around someone who seemed to know what they were doing.

"This is it. It's simple but I'm sure it will do. Goodnight." He walked away leaving me alone in the bedroom. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. It had been a long day.

## Chapter 9

We had talked for hours, asking questions back and forward. We were just about the only people left in the Lazy Crook, and Margaret stood at the bar just waiting to be able to leave. It was her turn to ask a question, and so I waited for her to speak. It might have been the first time that she paused the entire conversation. Eventually she spoke up.

“Hey, wanna get out of here?”

I hadn’t been expecting that. Sure, Charlie’s crazy plan was for exactly this to happen, but it still didn’t mean that I believed that it worked. The reason for my confusion was probably that I had discovered that I really like Morgan. She was manic and it fascinated me. So without hesitation I said yes and got up from the table.

I grabbed my bag from the booth Charlie had been sitting at and headed out the door behind her. She navigated us back to her house with the deftness only a local could have. Despite the darkness she walked with confidence, able to follow the path with her eyes closed. Eventually we were there, and she motioned to her house as though she was presenting some great treasure.

“Welcome to my humble abode.” She pulled out a key and began fiddling with the lock while I took in the house. It was a picturesque little cottage, just like you would see on tv. It contrasted the girl who stood in front of me, it’s perfection the opposite of the punk standing in front of me. I was snapped back to attention by the sound of the door swinging in.

“Come on in,” she said walking in and dropping her keys into a bowl by the door. I followed after her, looking around with curiosity.

“Your place is pretty cool,” I tried to complement, but it ended up coming out stilted. I was caught up in examining the walls. They were covered with posters from a thousand things, from movies, to bands, to comics. It contrasted against the wallpaper behind it, covered in little floral patterns. By the time I snapped back to pay attention to Morgan, she didn’t have a shirt on.

“Thanks, now come on.” She nodded her head towards the bedroom and walked through the doorway. The nerves I had felt, walking up to her at the bar were back, but this time I knew I definitely didn’t want to run. I turned the corner into her bedroom and saw her sitting on the bed. She was kicking her feet as they hung off the bed. It was now or never.

I walked over and fell on to the bed with a thump. She smiled as my hand went to her neck and then we kissed. As my tongue fluttered against hers, I felt her hand reach down and slowly removed my belt. My pants were down about the same time we pulled out of the kiss, and we were then suddenly a blur, throwing clothes all over the place. Again we kissed, this time laying against each other, the softness of her skin rubbing up against mine. I pulled back from the kiss to be able to speak.

“We need a condom... One second I have one in my pants. Where did my pants go?”

“Don’t worry,” she said as she reached for her dressing table, still laying under me. She pulled open a drawer and pulled one out. “Here.”

I kissed her quickly and went to grab it from out of her hand, but she pulled it back. She giggled and pushed me off of her, onto my back. She worked her way down my body with her

mouth, until she reached my penis. She gave it a quick peck, and then she did a lot more than that. As she finished sucking she rolled the condom down my shaft and clambered up my body. She lowered herself onto me. I just laid there and let it all happen to me, letting it become my whole world. She slid up and down with careful deliberation.

After a short but blissful time, I grabbed her by the hips and flipped her onto her back. I couldn't just let do all the work. I couldn't just sit there and let life roll over me. What was happening was happening and I had to accept that. So, I took charge here, where I felt that I could.

I caressed her neck as I thrusted into her. It wasn't long until she reached up and around me, pulling me into a crushing embrace. That was enough to end it. Despite all the air being forced out of me, the feeling of her against me as I plunged into her finished me with ease. She let out a moan as the hug tightened, followed by a giggle.

"Sorry, hope you didn't break a rib," she jabbed as she let go and fell back against the bed.

"No, I'm sure I'll be fine," I replied, as I too fell into the bed's warm embrace.

"I'll be right back, I just need to clean up."

"No problem," I said as she clambered over me to get out of bed.

While she was gone, I took off the condom, tied it, and threw it into the small wastebasket by the desk on the other side of the room. As I did, I looked over the desk. It had a poster sitting on it, but unlike all of the ones out in the hall, it was only half done. I looked up, taking in the room for the first time. It was covered in posters too, but these ones were hand drawn. They were still of the same movies that had been out in the hall, but the characters had been replaced. A few I recognised as people I had seen in my short time here in Easthedge. Every few posters, the movies protagonist had been replaced with none other than Morgan herself. There was a particularly good one where she was Sarah Connor, and another where she was Ripley.

"I know it seems crazy, but it's just a hobby. It's pretty fun actually." I heard her behind me, walking back to bed.

"They're really good, I didn't even notice that they weren't the real posters at first."

"Thanks," she said, looking embarrassed.

I walked over and joined her back in bed. "So it's my turn to ask a question, isn't it?"

"Yep." She slid up beside me with a yawn.

"Why didn't you ask me why I'm in town?"

"Then I would know when you're going to leave, and when life in this town is going to go back to normal. The longer I don't have to think about being stuck here the better." I knew the feeling of not wanting to acknowledge what was going to happen well. Easthedge was a nice distraction, but another couple of days and I would be back on the road to Detroit. Back on the road to Max.

After my moment of introspection I looked down at Morgan. "It's your turn," I said in a whisper, but I knew she was already asleep. It wasn't long before I was too.

# Act 2 - Anger

## Chapter 10

I woke up surprisingly well rested. The chapel's bed was not particularly comfortable, but after the stress of the previous day I slept like a baby. I realised I had slept in my clothes, and now they clung to me. I wandered out into the church, where Father Martin kneeled before the altar. He did not move to look at me, but he pointed to a doorway on the other side of the room.

"Kitchen's through there, coffee is in the pot. There's a bathroom too, with a shower if you want it." His hand returned to its position in front of him, and he continued to pray in silence.

"Thank you Father," I whispered, hoping to express my gratitude without disrupting him any further. I ran back into the small room in which I had spent the night and grabbed my bag before swiftly tiptoeing over to the bathroom.

I quickly scrubbed myself down, hoping to wash away yesterday's bad luck. With a fresh change of clothes, a simple teal sundress, but I felt no different. Looked myself in the mirror and smiled. If I was stuck here for the next day or two, I had better be happy about it. But inside, I was just the same. Why me, I wondered. The world was never fair, but it seemed particularly so for me.

I wandered through into the kitchen and grabbed the pot of coffee. I pour the black filter coffee into a tall blue mug and took a sip. Bitter, to bitter for my tastes. After a few sugars I found it palatable and returned to the church proper. I sat down on a pew, put my legs up on the one in front of me and began watch the priest, still in prayer. It was a long while before he finally finished and turned to look at me.

"You're still here?"

"Well it would have been rude to have left without thanking you, but I figured it would have been just as bad to disturb you, so I waited."

"Kind of you."

"The coffee's pretty good by the way, thanks for that."

"Again, very kind of you. Think I might grab a cup myself." he walked out into the kitchen and returned with a mug of his own and sat down next to me.

"So what do you do for fun around here Martin?"

"You're new to town, right? Why not wander around, try and meet some of the people, see the sights?"

I looked to my left, and saw the the plaque on the wall. I started to wonder, exactly how much had this crazy mayor buried?

"Do you know where the rest of those clues are?" I said, pointing at the little picture of a tree engraved in gold.

He laughed. "Going treasure hunting are we? Well it is one way to see the town. I couldn't tell you where they all are, or even if anyone knows where they all are. You could go over to the town hall though, maybe David will know. He's the town historian you see. Who

know you might even learn about some of our town's rich history while you're at it. Just tell him I sent you"

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Saying what?"

"Tell'em I sent you"

"We'll you're new in town. It shows that you at least know someone, that you aren't a stranger."

I looked at the little tree once again. I deserved something, anything, after yesterday and everyday before it. My life had fallen apart, even before I broke down on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. I was determined.

"Thanks for the info Father. I might just take you up going to see David."

"No problem."

I finished my cup and got up to place it back in the kitchen before leaving, taking my bag with me. I walk over to the door and just as I was about to exit, the old man called out to me.

"One thing though, David will hate it if you call him David. Call him Mr Brown. He's a stickler for formalities, it's what makes him such a good historian, but a terrible conversationalist.

"Thanks again Father, see you around." With that I was gone. The stress of the last few months of my life was like a pressure cooker, and now I was ready to explode.

# Chapter 11

When I woke up Morgan was still laying next to me. I got up and began to look around for the bathroom. I finally found it and relieved myself before turning to the mirror. I splashed water on my face and stood there for a second.

Morgan was stuck her, just wanting to get out. That was once me. The difference was that I eventually moved out of Detroit, but Morgan was still here in Easthedge. In reality, she was more like Max than like me. In two days the car would be fixed and I would role out of her life, just like I rolled out of Max's. If I was going to accept that Max was gone I had to accept something else too, that I was part of the reason why. I left him there, was I really going to do that to someone else. I had only known her for a night, but I still felt guilty.

I walked back into her room and began looking for my pants. It was then that she spoke up shakily, revealing that she was awake.

"Hey, uh, what time is it?" I finally grabbed my pants and pulled my phone out of the pocket. The screen said 8:32.

"About half past eight. Why?" Suddenly she was up, running around her room looking for clothes. She quickly assembled an outfit that looked rather unlike the one she had been wearing last night. It was a pale blue dress with frills and a name tag attached to the front.

"Shit, I've got to get to work." She threw her uniform down on the bed and jumped in her shower. She began to shout over the pitter patter of the water. "Sorry I can't show you the town or anything, but I'm sure you can entertain yourself."

"Yeah, don't worry about it, I'll go for a wander, see what there is."

"Oh, yeah, there's a party on tonight, if you want to go. Pretty much everyone in town between the ages of 18 and 25 is going to be there, could be fun."

"Yeah, sure I'd love to." I don't know why I had said that. I was just setting her up for disappointment. I would leave her alone and something would happen, I was sure of it. I guess I just didn't care. I was just doing whatever I felt like, and that was even worse. No wonder awful things happened around me.

"Cool, I'll text you the address."

"Yeah, cool. I'll just write down my number." I walked over to the desk and grabbed a scrap of paper and scribbled it out. "It's sitting on your desk."

I grabbed my bag and pulled out a new pair of clothes and began getting dressed. Once I had a new pair of jeans and a plain black t-shirt on I began to gather up the clothes I had flung around the room last night. Eventually Morgan got out of the shower and got dressed to. It was about this moment that I noticed something.

"Hey, did I have a folder of CDs with me last night?"

"Not that I can remember."

"Hmm, that's cool, I probably left it at the bar, I check there later."

"Why'd you have a folder of CDs with you?"

"It's an old friend's. Shit I can't believe I lost it."

"I'm sure it will turn up."

"Yeah, you're probably right. It's not it can have gotten far." This was just great, another thing I had abandoned. Who knew where it was now, or what had happened to it. I had to get the damn thing back, and I had to stop being so careless. Everything I touched seemed to be ruined in some way.

"Well I had better go if I don't want to be late. You coming?"

"Oh, yeah, I think I have everything, let's go." We began to walk down the hall and out off the door when I heard a voice behind us.

"So did you two have fun last night?" It was Morgan's sister, Margaret. While this was obviously an attempt to make us feel a little embarrassed, I realised that this was an opportunity.

"Hey Margaret, did you see a CD folder left around the bar last night when you were closing?" If anyone was going to know if it was still there it would be her.

"No idea, but we can go and look. I'm just about to go and open the place up for anyway. We'll look for it and you might even get a decent breakfast. And don't worry Morgan, I won't steal your new boyfriend." I blushed while Morgan just bristled at her sister, but underneath her reaction I could see that her cheeks were red. She turned to me and tried to whisper so that her sister couldn't hear.

"Go with her and look for your thing, I'll see you later. And don't mind her, she'll make a few jokes, but they're harmless." I couldn't help but wonder how long it would be before Laura was spreading this around too.

She pulled me in for a final kiss before she rushed out the door with a wave. Margaret walk over to me and waved back before turning to me and slapping me across the shoulder. "Come on loverboy, let's go see what happened to this folder of yours."

## Chapter 12

The door to the town hall was sitting open. As I had walked to the grand looking building in the center of town it seemed as though everyone in the town was out and about. They stared occasionally and whispered in each other's ears. The scene in front of me was no different. A half dozen tables of old people, each holding a hand of cards looked up from what they were doing to look at the newcomer on their doorstep. At first I figured that they must be playing bridge, but then I noticed the chips that were stacked between them. I walked into the hall of poker playing grannies, and it seemed to break the spell I had over them, as they went back to playing their games.

When I got inside, I was able to see that the walls inside were covered in doors. Even less convenient was the fact that those doors appeared to have nothing differentiating them from each other. I began to circle the room, trying to turn knobs where I could, and knocking on doors when they didn't budge. When I had completed a lap of the room, I had found a small room filled with bookshelves to the point where I could hardly open the door. I small kitchenette, an empty storeroom and five locked doors. The other thing I had found during my attempt was the stares of the entire room once again. I caved, and crept up to the closest geezer.

"Hi, um, you wouldn't happen to know where Mr Brown is, would you?"

"Oh, why didn't you just ask? You looked rather silly walking around like a chicken with it's head chopped off, trying door after door."

"We'll I figured that you wouldn't want me interrupting your games."

"Haha, it's not like we're playing for anything particularly juicy, and he's boring to play with anyway, I'd be glad to have him gone for a few minutes."

"The only reason that you don't like playing with me is that I catch you whenever you cheat," a man across the table added.

"You must be Mr Brown. Father Martin told me that you were the man to see if I wanted to know anything about the town."

"Yes, I am Mr Brown, and Father Martin is indeed correct, I am the town historian after all."

"See that, he likes it when you stroke his ego. I'm Delila by the way, but you can call me Dee." The old woman glanced at Mr Brown as she said this, delighting in his look of perturbation.

"We'll it is a pleasure to meet both of you, I'm Charlotte, but you can call me Charlie."

"Would the lot of you focus, were meant to be playing a game here," another of the old men sitting at the table uttered gruffly.

"Yes, yes, calm down Barney, I'll take our guest here into my office. That way I might actually be able to tell this girl what she wants to know without Delila interrupting me every five minutes. Come on Charlotte, this way if you please." The man got up and began searching a ring of keys as he lurched across the room. Barney went back to focusing on his hand, while Dee just waved at me as I followed the ancient historian.

He sat behind an old oak desk that was polished to a mirror sheen. He motioned for me to take the seat opposite him, and then pulled a pair of wire framed glasses from out of his desk. He placed the spectacles carefully on his hairless head and turned his attention back to me.

"There, now I can actually see you. Now what brings you here Charlotte?"

"Well I was wondering about the mayor's treasure. You see, I saw the engraving in the church and was wanted to know where the rest were."

"Ah, another treasure hunter are you? Fine, it is better than most of the children here in town, after all it is at least taking some interest in the storied past of our fine town. I have a list of the major landmarks across town, it has all of them listed." He reached into his drawer and reached inside.

"But if I want to find the treasure, don't I need to know more than just where they are? What if I don't know enough about the mayor who buried it and can't solve this puzzle of his or something? I mean, why did he bury it? How much did he bury? I mean, I don't even know his name?"

The old man chuckled. It seemed like something he didn't make a habit of. He placed a piece of paper that he had pulled out of his desk onto the table.

"You make a better treasure hunter than most. Everyone who grows up here in town goes looking for the treasure at some point. For most of them, that just means sitting in front of one of the carvings for an afternoon and giving up. Occasionally someone will go a little further, but most end up deciding that there is no treasure and that the mayor was simply tricking everyone. You however, seem to understand that there is more to it than just spending a few minutes gazing at a picture of a tree. So yes, I will tell you the story."

"Thank you, Mr Brown," I said, hoping that he wouldn't be as long winded when telling the actual story.

"You see, in the early 1900's, the then Mayor, Stuart Davies, felt that his children did not deserve the vast wealth that he had accrued throughout his life, and as such decided to test them. Before he died, he had those plates commissioned and placed around town. In his will, it simply stated that he felt that his children had fallen out of touch with the community he loved, and as such, they would need to reconnect with the touchstones of the town's society. You see, he thought that if they had to visit the town's major landmarks they would prove that they were worthy. The only problem was that no one knows what to do with the clues found on the plaques, and so the treasure remains buried. It is the property of whoever finds it, and so I do wish you luck."

"Well," I said as I grabbed the piece of paper, "That certainly is a lot to think about Mr Brown. I don't want to keep you from your game any longer, so thank you for your help."

"Oh, no need to thank me, it was a pleasure speaking with you." The man seemed to like the sound of his own voice it seemed, because it felt as though he was the only one who had spoken the entire time we were in the office. But I held my tongue on that front, may as well let him talk considering he appeared to enjoy it so much.

We both stepped back into the main hall, and we walked over to his table where his friends still sat playing cards.

"Hope he didn't talk your ear off too much Charlie." Dee seemed to take extreme delight in tormenting her old friend.

"No, he was very helpful."

"We'll it's good to know he's still good for something."

"Just remember girly," The gruff old man that they had referred to as Barney suddenly said, "The search ain't all it's cracked up to be."

"Don't worry about him," Mr Brown said dismissively, "he's just been searching longer than anyone is all. I hope you enjoy your tour of the town."

"I'm sure I will. Good by everyone." Everyone at the table waved and said a quiet goodbye as I walked away, except for Dee, who shouted a goodbye that caused most of the other tables to stop playing for a moment.

It didn't matter what Barney had said, I would find that treasure. I deserved it.

## Chapter 13

The booth was empty. I had ran over to it as soon as I got inside, only to be greeted with nothing. I had to find it. Of all the times I could have possibly lost it, this was possibly the worst. Margaret strolled over to behind the bar, calm as could be.

"Find what you're looking for?" She said. I know she didn't mean anything by it, but the words still stung.

"It's not here. One second, I'll call Charlie. She left before me, she might have taken it with her." I really hoped she had, and that this was all a big mistake.

"Well okay then, you call your friend. I'm going to start on breakfast, so I'll be in the back if you need me."

I paced around the bar, weaving between the tables and stools. I dialed and only had to wait a couple of rings before I heard her voice.

"Hey, Brian, how'd it go?" She had a certain pep to her voice. No doubt she thought that this was a call to brag about how last night went. Under normal circumstances it would have been, but I was beginning to freak out.

"Hey, did you grab the CD folder when you left last night?" I blurted out, ignoring her question entirely.

Her tone of voice changed. "No, I didn't. Why, did you lose it?" Shit, so I had lost it. I got careless and ended up abandoning what may have been my last link to Max.

"Yeah, looks like I did," I said shortly.

"Well, go back to the Lazy Crook, Margaret might know what happened to it."

"Yeah, that's where I am now. I'll talk to her, see if I can coax some memory out of her."

"Well good luck, I hope you find it quick. And I assume that if you were forgetting prized possessions that last night went well."

"Surprisingly so."

She laughed at that. "I didn't think you had it in you. We'll I will meet up with you later. Keep me up to date on how the search goes."

"I will, see you later Charlie." With that I hung up. I marched myself behind the bar to the kitchen in the back, desperate to solve this problem as soon as possible.

"No luck, huh?" She said, able to read me like it was nothing. I suppose I was wearing my emotions on my sleeves. She pulled a couple of fried eggs off of the grill and placed them on some plates already stacked with toast. Margaret grabbed the two plates and began walking towards me with them.

"Come on, you can try and refresh my memory while we eat."

"You heard that, huh?"

"It's surprisingly easy to hear thing in here when there isn't a sea of drunken farmers." She placed the plates on the bar and began to dig into her meal. "So what did it look like? The folder I mean, not my sister."

Margaret seemed intent on rattling me, like it was a game to her. I ignored her attempts and pushed forward. "It's black, with blue trim all around it, and a blue adjustable strap that's big enough to sling over your shoulder." As I finished my description I began to dig in.

"Erm, yeah, I think I saw it," she said, struggling to swallow before beginning to talk.

"Really?" At least I could solve this particular crisis, even if it was a particularly minor one all things considered.

"One of the local kids had it slung at his side. You see often times the local kids try to sneak in here. For some reason they think I won't notice, despite the fact that I've known some of them since they were in diapers. Couldn't tell you which one, but I'm willing to bet that if you head down to Davies Park where the high schoolers hang out that you would be able to ask around." The last part Margaret's speech was accompanied by a couple of thrusts of her knife in what must have been the direction of the park. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something.

I was just finishing cramming the food that the bartender opposite me had prepared and getting ready to take off to the park when she spoke again. "Look, I make jokes and all that, but seriously, don't hurt my sister." She spoke the words with honesty that I hadn't heard from her in all of the little time I had known her.

"I know she's an adult, and she can make her own decisions, but she's going through a rough time right now, so please, just, don't get her hopes up."

"I'll try my best," I replied somberly. I felt an anger rise up at myself, as I was unsure if I would be able to keep that promise.

She nodded in response, and took my plate. "Well, I hope you find what you're looking for," she said, back to her normal self. With that cheery farewell, I departed the Lazy Crook once again, ready to begin my search.

## Chapter 14

My stomach growled as I hung up the phone. Brian had sounded nervous on the phone, but I was sure that he would find the folder in the end. Right now what mattered was getting something to eat. And while I ate, I would be able to go over the list that Mr Brown had given me. So I walked down the busy main street, looking for a place to get some food.

While I walked, I noticed that people seemed to be congregating down one of the roads that intersected the main street. As I approached, I saw gazebos placed haphazardly down the short lane, with a variety of people huddled beneath them buying and selling goods. It seemed I had discovered the town markets. I looked down to the information sheet in my hand, found my suspicions correct. The courtyard at the end of the path was in fact the location of one of Mayor Davies' clues. Not only that, but the park that surrounded it had been renamed after him, and a statue of him erected. Yet, I could not face the thought of braving the crowds that stood in the way on an empty stomach, and so I continued on my quest to find food.

It wasn't long before I came upon a diner. Like almost every place I had seen in town, it looked homely, like it was just waiting to welcome you inside. I stepped through the door and a little bell rang signalling my arrival. In mere seconds a motherly looking woman, her blue eyes bright and her rosy cheeks framed by auburn hair, came over to greet me.

"Hello there, you must be Charlie. I'm Carla." She could obviously see the confusion on my face from being recognised by a complete stranger, and so she began to speak once again. "Bill told me all about your car problems. I'm his wife, see."

"Oh, right, yes, he did mention you, too. Sorry, for a moment there I thought I had a stroke." At least the reason she knew me wasn't because of something Laura had said.

"Well I have a table for you, if you come right this way. Is Brian going to be joining you?"

"No, uh, he's misplaced something, and so he went to go grab it, so it's just me."

"We'll that's okay. Here's your table, and here's a menu. Just holler when you're ready, and either me or Morgan will come over and help you." She motioned over to the other waitress, who was pouring coffee at another table. I didn't pay much attention, as I was flicking through the menu as soon as I had it in my hands.

"Well thanks Carla, and um, tell Bill I said hi. I get the feeling that that's the sort of thing people do around here?"

"Sure is. See we'll make an Eastheder out of you yet," she said with an infectious smile.

She left as I began to delve deeper into the contents of the menu. Eventually I decided on a stack of pancakes and some more coffee and let out a short yell to call over one of the waitresses. The other waitress, with black hair held up in a loose bun, walked over to me, a glint of recognition in her eye.

"You must be Charlie." I looked around me. This town was going to drive me insane.

"How is it that everyone knows me? I always end up feeling awful when I have no idea who they are," I said with dismay.

"You're just like Brian said you were." That's when it dawned on me. It was hard to tell without the grungy clothes, her hair up, and clear air rather than the smoky atmosphere of the bar, but this was the woman that Brian had gone home with.

"Sorry, this only makes it worse. Mind if I ask you name?"

"Morgan."

"Right, Carla already said that didn't she. Well Morgan, it's a pleasure to meet you, and I'm sort of relieved that you at least know me because of someone telling the truth rather than whatever rumors are floating around."

"Oh I bet. This whole town is a bunch of gossipmongers. Anyway, what can I get you?"

The presence of her standing before me in the flesh had distracted me from my growling belly. Maybe this trip was looking up for Brian. "Oh right, food, uh, a stack of pancakes please. Oh and coffee."

"No problem, it'll be right over."

She left me alone, to look over the list of landmarks in front of me. In total, it said that there were five plaques scatter about the town, in different locations. Two I already knew about, the church and the park. One it said was in the mayor's former home, a farmhouse just a short walk out of town, which was now preserved as historical building. Another sat on a wall in the town's small police station. Finally, an engraving sat in the foundations of the town's one and only school. I began putting them into my phone, trying to get an idea of how best to tackle the situation. I decided it would be best to check out the ones that were in town first, and hit the old farmhouse last.

Carla brought over my pancakes, and they were gone within minutes thanks to the gluttony induced by my desperate stomach. My coffee on the other hand I savoured. As I did, I tried to sketch out the church engraving as best I could from memory, knowing that I could always go back if need be. Then, feeling the need to complete my newly formed set of notes, I wrote down what I could remember of what Mr Brown had told me. With the important details on paper, I got up to pay my bill before leaving.

I handed Morgan a couple of notes she spoke up. "Well I hope I see you tonight, Charlie."

"Huh, what's tonight?"

"Oh, no one's told you yet. There's a party tonight, it should be fun, just ask Brian, he'll have the details."

"Cool, I'll be there," I replied. I looked forward to getting to know this girl better. She seemed to really like Brian, I just hoped he felt the same way.

After settling up, I waved goodbye to Morgan and Carla, calling back over my shoulder as I went. "Thanks for the meal, guys. My compliments to the chef." Carla obviously liked that.

"It was our pleasure, hun. Hope I see you again soon."

Now, I was off to Davies Park to try and solve a mystery.

## Chapter 15

Between me and the park was a crowd of people. They mulled around, looking at knick-knacks that sat at different booths. I weaved my way through them, bumping up against townspeople as I did. Eventually I made it to the other side of the mass and stood on the edge of a small park. A few people walked around the grassy fields, carrying the spoils of their morning at the market, but in the center, under an imposing bronze statue was a group of teenagers, sat on hard concrete.

I walked up to the lot of them briskly. They whispered amongst themselves as I approached. Before I could get a word in, one of them stood up. He appeared to be the leader of the little group. He wore a red plaid shirt and a slightly dirty pair of trousers. By his posture I could tell that he was meant to be the most popular kid in school. He immediately asked a question that must have been on all of their minds.

“Is it true that you’re here to build a skyscraper?”

“What? No. I thought Laura was telling everyone I was a secret agent?”

“Are you a secret agent?” One of the kids near the back chimed in.

I sighed, exasperated. “No, I am not a secret agent.”

“Just thought I should ask.”

“Look, did any of you sneak into the Lazy Crook last night?”

A few of the members of the group looked at each other shiftily and began to whisper once again. Their leader put I stop to that by speaking up confidently. “No, none of us did... uh why you asking?” I don’t know what I expected, it wasn’t like they were just going to admit it.

At that moment I heard a familiar voice from behind, easily identifiable over the rabble of the multitudes in the direction.

“Hey, Brian, fancy seeing you here!” Charlie called. She walked up to me and put a hand around my shoulder. “How’s it going, huh? Morgan told me all about the party. It ought to be fun, huh.”

“Oh, hey Charlie. I didn’t ask, where did you end up last night anyway?”

“The church, surprisingly enough. It was surprisingly enlightening. On that note, you lot need to move.” She looked down at a piece of paper clutching in her hand and then motioned at the gaggle in front of us to move to the side. Something about the confidence in her voice must have struck a chord with them, as they hurriedly moved, revealing a golden plaque behind them.

“Another tree?” She said with surprise. “Whatever, at least it’s slightly different.” She pulled a pencil and a new, fresh page out of her bag and began to sketch what it looked like. The kids looked on her with wonderment as she did so.

“You’re treasure hunters!” The same odd one at the back exclaimed.

“Well, there’s another rumor,” I said to Charlie.

“At least this one isn’t strictly untrue,” she replied, turning to show me a sly look on her face.

"Look, you aren't going to get in trouble or anything. I'm just looking for something I lost. It's a folder full of CDs. Have any of you seen it?" As I implored them, I noticed that the school children were looking over my shoulder and motioning to someone to go away.

"Hey guys, look what I got!" I turned around to see short, gangly child holding Max's folder.

"Run!" They all shouted. "Run Owen, run!"

He began running, and so did I. After a few seconds we were in the bustle of the markets. I heard Charlie shout after me. "Wait up!" I didn't have time to wait for her so I continued. Where coming through last time had been easy, with only a few bumps here and there, this time I found myself having to push harder and harder to get any further.

I saw a few faces I could place as I made my way through. At one point, I was Bill holding small porcelain box in his hands. We bumped shoulders as we past, and I heard a shattering sound as I kept running. I shouted and apology over my shoulder as I continued, trying to find my way back to the main road.

Eventually I made it to open space. I stood on Easthedge's major road and looked in both directions, try to see where he had run off to. I saw him running to the left, but before I could follow I felt a hand grab my shoulder. I cursed that I wouldn't be able to continue the chase, but I couldn't blame Bill for coming after me. Yet, when I turned around, I found that it wasn't Bill that I stood face to face with. I did not know this man's face, but he apparently knew mine.

"So you're Brian, huh?" I began to open my mouth to respond, but before I could get anything out he launched into a further tirade of words. "You had better leave Morgan alone. We may be broken up, but she just doesn't know what she's missing yet. So I suggest that you step away, before I have to teach you a real lesson."

With that he pushed me back, and walked away to the right. As he walked away I was able to actually take in what he looked like. If anything, he looked like me if I was wearing a lot of spikes. A black t-shirt and dark jeans, my mirror image, but on his wrists were bracelets with small shiny spikes affixed to them. His brown hair had far too much gel in it. The look and the speech gave me the impression that he was trying to hard.

After having stared at him as he walked away for a while, Charlie emerged from the crowd. She looked a little exhausted.

"That place is a maze, I'm surprised I got out. So, it looks like you lost him." She caught here breath, stood up straight and looked down the street.

"Didn't lose him, that guy stopped me." I pointed in the odd man's direction. Charlie raised her eyebrows as she caught sight of him.

"Well, I doesn't matter, I have an idea." She pulled out the same list she had looked at by the statue. "I'm heading over to the school. Someone there can probably tell you where he lives or something. You know his name know right, and what he looks like."

"Yeah, yeah, let's go," I said, shaking my head as I let my gaze turn away from the mysterious person who had stopped me. "So you're a treasure hunter now?"

"Yeah, I'll explain on the way," she said with a grin.

# Chapter 16

I looked down at my phone, trusting that everyone else on the footpath would simply get out of my way. Its screen was lit up with a map to Easthedge High School. It would be the first time I had been anywhere in the town that wasn't on the same street, a fact that felt extremely strange, having become familiar with the quaint main road.

"And so you just decide to go chasing after this treasure, like that," Brian said, snapping his fingers to accentuate his point.

"Yep, just like that," I muttered, not looking up. I stopped suddenly in the middle of the path, not caring that I was blocking traffic. I turned to Brian and grabbed his shoulders. Looking deep into his eyes, I began to speak again, though this time there was a fire to my voice.

"Look, life has been awful to us. I know life isn't fair, but that doesn't mean I'm not angry about it. Of all of the things in my life right now, this one I might actually be able to control. So I am going to find that damn treasure, and I am going to kick life's ass!"

He looked at me for a moment. That I had been expecting, I had just started shouting in the middle of the street, so it seemed like a reasonable reaction. But then he nodded.

"Come on then. If you want to get that treasure we have to get moving." He began to stroll along, his hand thrust into his pockets. "Life really is unfair isn't it?" He seemed to say it to no one in particular.

"Wait up," I said, dashing to catch back up with him. After that, it wasn't long until we had made it to the school. There were a few people using the sports fields and courts around its grounds as we entered. They kicked, passed and dribbled balls of various shapes and sizes. They looked like they were having fun.

"Well, where is this thing then?" Brian asked. I looked down at the sheet that Mr Brown had given me.

"It says that it is in the foundations of the office building." I scanned my surroundings, looking for the right place as I spoke.

"Perfect, if there is anyone here that is able to tell me where this Owen kid is, they would be there," He responded. "Two birds with one stone."

I finally spied where we were meant to go. As we closed in on it, I could tell I had found it by the telltale glint of golden metal at the base of the building. I ran the last few steps up to the plaque and knelt beside it.

"I'll leave you to it," Brian stated, opening the door to the office. "I hope that this one is particularly enlightening, too. I won't be a minute." With that, he disappeared inside to continue his search for his CD thief. That left me alone to continue my own quest. As I turned to take the picture on the plate in from the first time I was perturbed. It was another picture of a tree.

Again, it was obvious that it was a different tree, but it still confused me. Why was old Mayor Stuart Davies so obsessed with trees? I could tell that they were different, but I didn't know why, and it frustrated me. Nevertheless I began to draw the crude carving as best I could. Once I had finished, I pulled out my other two drawings and splayed them out across the ground in front of me.

With them all here, easily viewable I could see the distinction. They weren't just different trees. One of the sketches showed a tree with long, winding branches spread wide. Another had branches that were just as long, but were straight as an arrow. The third, and the one that corresponded to the image that sat in the stonework in front of me was much more vertical. The tree in the carving went straight up with the few branches it had widening at the top. It also had many tiny leaves all over it, making it the most detailed of the engravings that I had seen so far. As I leaned in to examine its detail once again, I noticed flecks of white in the grooves that were meant to represent the leaves. While it might have been just some gunk that one of the students had wiped on it, I noted it down anyway, just in case.

I would have to go back to the town hall. I had stumbled across a small library there before, and perhaps Mr Brown would let me use it to work out what these trees were. But for now, I was done. So I leaned up next to the plaque that I had just copied down and waited.

## Chapter 17

I walked the carpeted halls of the small office building in silence. It reminded me of school I had gone to in my youth. You always felt out of place walking around this part of the school. You weren't meant to be there, it was the realm of teachers and you were just a snot-nosed kid. I suppose that's why I felt so out of place, because I wasn't meant to be here now either.

I peeked in windows and knocked on doors as I methodically worked my way from room to room. Once upon a time I would have been menace to this place but now I snuck around it with care. While I was generally good a school, it didn't stop me from being a terror where it really counted. Me and Max would try and find any nook or alcove that hid us from the student populace and would blast music like we wanted our ears to bleed. That usually meant that we were next to some classroom with a teacher trying to mark tests, or an one of the admin trying to get paperwork done. But that was part of the fun, getting into trouble, and we always knew that if things got out of hand, we had a friend to watch our back. Some friend I turned out to be. When I got the CDs back, I would blast them just like old times, even if it made my eardrums burst.

Eventually, the monotony of my fist knocking against wood was broken by the gasp of another human being. It seemed I wasn't alone in here after all. I heard them make a few sounds that I could only describe as being what happens when a person simply allows their vocal chords to flap about unchecked. Eventually it seemed that they had pulled themselves together, as the sounds stopped and I heard a voice ring out from behind the door.

"Um, who is it?" They sounded nervous. No doubt they didn't expect anyone else to be here today.

"Well, you don't know me, but my name is Brian, and I'm here to ask you about one of your students."

Suddenly, hurried footsteps could be heard through the door. The door was heaved open and a short, bespectacled man in the wooliest jumper I had ever seen peeked through the door.

"So you're Brian? Laura told me about you, she said that you were here to do an audit on the town. Is that why you're here? It's just that I'm the only one here see, and I'm awful at numbers. It would be better if you came back Monday. Yes, on Monday everyone will be here, you'll have a much easier time of it Monday."

The man spoke with such speed that I couldn't get a word in edgewise. When he had finished, he moved to close the door on me and return to whatever he had been doing in his office. Just before the door shut on me for good I slipped my hand through and grabbed it's edge.

"I don't know why any of you listen to Laura. Seriously, an auditor? I am looking for something sir, but it isn't you books. I'm looking for a kid named Owen, I think he goes to school here. You couldn't help me find him, could you?"

"Oh, well why didn't you say so, come in and have a seat." he flung the door open for me and began to walk back to his desk. Abruptly he stopped in his tracks, and then once again began moving, this time in doubletime. When he got to his desk, her through a pillow that had been sitting on top of it into the corner of the room. It seemed that he hoped I hadn't noticed. We both sat down, acting as though nothing had happened.

"So why is it that you are looking for Owen?" He asked me. "He's always seemed like a good enough kid to me. A little quiet, but nothing to worry about."

"He took something of mine you see. Something of sentimental value. A case full of CDs. I'm just looking to get it back."

"Oh, well that doesn't sound like Owen at all. Though he is always trying to get those popular kids to like him. Children these days are so cruel, don't you agree Brian. They once told him that if he ate a spider that they would let him hang out with them. I suppose that this is just the next right of passage."

"As sad as that is, I'm really just trying to get my CDs back. Its very important that i get them before I leave town."

"Well there isn't a whole lot I can do. It's not a school day so he isn't here, therefore I have no idea where he is."

"Well could you tell me where he lives, or give me his parents phone number or something?"

"I'm not just going to give out a student's information now Brian. I'll give his parents a call myself, if that would help?" Finally, some headway.

"Yes, thank you, that would be extremely helpful."

"Let's see here," he said as he typed into the computer on his desk. After a few taps he had found the phone number, and dialed it into the phone on his desk. He placed the receiver to his ear and we both waited, and waited, and waited some more. After a minute the man put the receiver down again. "Welp, that's about all I can do 'til Monday," He stated.

I couldn't blame him, he had tried. It wasn't his fault. I let my head hit the desk anyway. I really wish he had left that pillow there. I groaned and then thanked him despite the failure.

"No problem. I'll let you know if I see him." I knew he wouldn't see him, as he probably wasn't going to see outside this room, but I appreciated the gesture all the same.

I got up and left, rubbing my forehead. I thanked him again as I closed the door. Through the frosted glass next to the door I could see his silhouette retrieve his pillow. I sighed and walked out of the office. I had failed for now. Margaret's words popped into my head, prompted by the failure. Talk of Morgan's hopes and dreams. Perhaps I understood those a little better now, having met that strange spiked lad. I couldn't protect Max, or his folder, but maybe there was someone I could. I got back outside and saw Charlie sitting against a wall.

"Come, we have to get back to town."

"Find out where it is?"

"No, but I figured out something just as important."

## Chapter 18

As we made our way back to town Brian didn't talk very much. When he finally did have something to say, it was about Morgan. He had to find her he claimed, though he couldn't tell me why. I'm not sure he really knew himself.

"I ran into her at the diner. She works there. If you are really so desperate to see her, go wait for her there. I'm headed to the police station, apparently it's where the next clue is."

"Thanks," he shouted as he began to run into town.

"Just don't forget to text me where the party is!" I screamed back, holding my phone in the air. I groaned as he ran off into the distance. Let the lover boy go on a goose chase, I had things to do.

It was impossible to miss the police station, with its slick coat of paint. It looked freshly painted, with white walls and blue accents. Across the top of the door in a red you could see from outer space were the words 'Eastridge Police Department'. Consulting my guide I was confused. The sheriff's office is what it said, but that couldn't be. That would mean that it was not just inside, but in an area that they surely wouldn't let me into. It must have been a mistake, so I headed inside to fix it.

Yet, before I could head inside I noticed someone out of the corner of my eye. "Laura!" I exclaimed as I marched up to the woman. As I did, I heard a light crunch under my feet. As I looked down, I saw a bunch of flowers, lilacs, which had been cut from from the planter Laura knelt by.

"Well snap, I'll have to find something else for Bill," she said looking down at the crushed plants.

"Oh no, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, I just came over to... Oh yeah, I came over to ask what is it that you've been telling people about me?"

"Only the truth darling." She had a smile on her face that looked genuine, but couldn't be.

"We'll... just... I don't know, don't do it again," I huffed. "Oh, and I'm really sorry about the flowers," I added as a stormed off into the police station.

A bell rung as I pushed through the heavy wooden doors. I found myself in a small waiting room, across from a desk. Behind that desk sat a man in uniform and with slicked back hair. He held a magazine in one hand and a mug in the other. He looked up, throwing the magazine down on the desk.

"Well it's not very often we have visitors in here, let alone ones from out of town. What can I do for you, Charlie?" I looked behind me and cursed under my breath.

"What did Laura tell you about me?"

"Oh, don't worry, she's harmless, and most of us know not believe what she says. Though I can assume that she got your name right, can't I?"

"Yeah, she got that one right."

"Well I'm Chief Barton, and what can I do for you Charlie?" His voice was calming. He seemed like he was born to be a police officer, like the badge was pinned on his chest as soon

as he came into the world. His mannerisms made me forget all about Laura, and I pulled out the landmarks list that Mr brown had given me.

"Well, I have this you see, and it says that one of Mayor Davies markers is in here. But that can't be right, can it? I mean you can't have people coming and going, looking at the thing while you're trying to work."

"I think you are overestimating the amount of tourists we get here is Easthedge a little bit. Come with me to my office." With that he got up and lifted a section of the a long desk he sat at. With that, a small gap, big enough for me to fit through opened up, and I was in the station proper. Barton began to walk between desk towards an office with a door left ajar, beckoning me to catch up.

I reached the office after he had already disappeared into it. When I rounded the door, he was leaning up against his desk, staring at a wall. He looked at me, and then motioned his head towards the spot on the wall he had been so focused on.

"You know, Mayor Davies never intended these to be tourist attractions. They were meant to show people the beauty of the town he loved. I think that's why he put it in here.

There it was, hanging on the wall. It was shinier than the others. The Chief must have polished it often. The only this that dulled the plaque's sheen was the deep red paint that filled the grooves of the engraving.

"Do you mind if a sketch it?" I asked, trying to be polite.

"Oh, go ahead."

I pulled out a new page and began to replicate the tree that sat in front of me. This one was a lot like the first, that I had seen at the church, with it's large winding branches extending from a strong trunk. The big difference was the vivid red.

"Did it always have that paint on it?" i enquired, not looking up from my work.

"As far as I know. It was there when I tried to find the treasure as a kid at least."

"So the color is a part of the clue?" I said to myself as I noted it down.

"I suppose so," he said back, taking a large sip from his cup.

I finished up my drawing and stashed it in my bag. "Well thank you for showing it to me Chief Barton."

"No problem, thank you for breaking me out of the boredom of my day so far." He offered a hand to shake. I took it and he gave a quick pump before letting go. "Don't you go getting yourself in trouble looking for that treasure you hear."

"Never try to get in trouble, it just sort of finds me."

He let out a deep laugh from his belly. "Isn't that how it always goes. Let me walk you out."

We strolled back to the exit together, where I squeezed through the hole in the desk once again and Barton went back to his magazine. I waved goodbye and without looking up he replied in kind.

When I exited Laura was gone, and so were the lilacs.

## Chapter 19

I stopped running a few meters away from the diner. I didn't want to look like a desperate idiot. On the other hand, maybe I was a desperate idiot. In the end, it didn't matter whether I was or not. I leaned over, hands on my knees so that I could catch my breath and not be panting as I walked in. Once I had a handle on my breathing, I began walking over to the entrance to the diner.

A kind voice and the ding of a bell greeted me as I entered. It came out of a woman wearing the same uniform Morgan had been wearing when she left that morning.

"Oh, hi there Brian. Charlie was in here earlier, said you had lost something. Did you find it okay?" She spoke with familiarity, even more so than any of the other community centric individuals that lived in this town.

"Oh um, no... no I didn't. Uh, I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, sorry, I'm Carla."

"Carla. Right... Bill's wife, right? Oh could you tell him I'm sorry about this morning. I bumped into him at the fair and I think he dropped something."

"You saw him at the fair? I thought he was at home all of today? Hmm, of well, what can I do for you?"

"I was looking for Morgan actually."

"Oh, well she's out back on break, just head on through the kitchen." She pointed towards the back of the restaurant.

"Thanks Carla," I said, following her directions.

"Well it's not everyday that Easthedge is this interesting," she replied with a giggle.

I made my way past tables to the kitchen. As I did, I heard the ring of the bell by the door once again. The delicious smells hit me, and suddenly I realised that it was the late afternoon and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. In the kitchen was a large man. He had a thick head of hair, barely contained by a hairnet. He nodded as I walked past him and out of the place.

She was sitting on the ground, leaned up against the wall of the diner. She had a pair of earbuds plugged into her ears. I slumped onto the ground next to her and she pulled one of them out. She looked different, with her jet black hair up in a bun, but just as gorgeous.

"Oh, hey Brian. Shit, I never texted you, did I." She pulled out her phone and after a few taps I heard my phone buzz. "There we go, now you're all set. So what brings you here Brian?"

"I found my folder, problem is some kid has it, and runs away from me whenever I try and get it back. So I figured I would come here and see you."

"Well isn't that sweet of you," she said, lightly tapping my shoulder. "If you don't mind, why is that folder so important?"

"It's not mine. It actually belongs to a good friend of mine." I looked her in the eye for a moment. "Man, Max would kill me if he knew I had lost it." With that she raised her hand and grazed against my chin.

"You're not entirely to blame. I do seem to remember someone distracting you a little last night. Say, do you know who took it?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, some kid named Owen."

Her head spun in a dime. She got up and looked at the door I had just come through.  
"He was eating in there when I went on break"

"I must have walked right past him. I'll be right back."

I weaved through the kitchen once again, and again the large man nodded at my passing. I walked past the booths that lined the diner and none of them contained Owen. Eventually I had made it back to the front of the restaurant and was face to face with Carla again.

"What's wrong dear?" My face must have looked worried.

"Did you see Owen come through here?"

"Oh, yes I did. He left not long after you came in." I cursed under my breath and quickly apologized for it. It had been so close. Morgan had caught up behind me and I turned to her.

"I'll be right back." I ran out the door and could not see him in either direction. I could see the spiked fellow walking towards me though. He had a menace in his eyes, and I knew what was coming before he even spoke.

"I told you to stay away from her! Now you're going to regret it!" I had come outside expecting to have to chase someone down, and now I was the one being chased. I took off, and he followed. As I continued down main street, I noticed that the market had cleared out. I turned down the lane it had been on, hoping to lose him in Davies Park. As I looked behind me, I could see that I hadn't shaken him.

Across the park I could see that someone had moved one of the gazebos from the morning market into the middle of the field. Under it was a table and few other knick-knacks. If I couldn't lose him I could slow him down, so I headed for it. I deftly jumped over the table, hoping that my pursuer couldn't match the move. I allowed myself a moment to glance back, but what I saw made me stop in my tracks. He simply flipped the table out of his way and kept running. Like that he was on me.

One punch to the face and I was on my back. He spat, before he turned to leave. As he did he said, "And don't forget this time." I tilted my head up to look at him walk away, before dropping it back down into the dirt.

Everything had gone wrong, ever since I found out yesterday. This was my penance for leaving Max. This was my penance for letting him get killed. I knew that, I had done nothing but beat myself up over it all day. But there had to be something I could do. Max wasn't the only person who lived in fear, in a place they barely tolerated. Maybe I just had to prove that I wouldn't let the same thing happen again, that I wouldn't let bad things happen to good people. Then I could get the folder back and the car fixed.

It was then that I heard footsteps trudge across the grass, and I saw Morgan standing over me.

# Act 3 - Bargaining

## Chapter 20

I couldn't work out how I would get over to Mayor Davies old house. The note I had said it was just outside town, but without my car that may as well have been on the other side of the planet. I figured I should just head back to the town hall and try to figure out what I had already copied down. I strolled into the hall, only to find the lot of them still playing, despite it now being late in the afternoon.

"Given up already, have you?" Barney grumbled at me mockingly. "Figured you would."

"For your information, I'm here to as Mr Brown if I could use the library." I pointed towards the cupboard sized room full of books I had stumbled across earlier. "I may not be able to get out to the Mayor's old farmhouse, but I already have some promising leads."

"Ha, can't even make it out to the old farmhouse huh? It's like you ain't even trying."

"Come on Barney, if you want to rub it in the girl's face, at least give her a ride out to the farmhouse," Dee cut in. "Make it fair."

"I have to agree with Delila for once Barney. Take her out to the see it, at least make it sporting." That just made Barney grumble more.

"You've had decades on her you old coot, how can you claim to have beaten her when she hasn't even seen all of them?"

Eventually Barney's grumbling turned into actual words. "Fine, fine, I'll take her," he said, grabbing an old and rusty keychain off of the table and standing up slowly. I guess I had my ride.

"Thank you, Barney."

"Don't mention it. No, seriously, don't mention it. The faster this goes, and with the least talking possible, the better."

"Don't pay him any mind, Charlie, you have fun."

"And don't worry, the library and I will be here when you get back Charlotte."

With that we were off. True to his word, Barney didn't speak a word as he creaked down the set of stairs out the front of the building. He got in a well worn old ute that was once painted red, and I joined him on the passenger's side. The old girl started up easily enough, considering what she looked like, and we were suddenly off and away.

It wasn't until we were a ways out of town that Barney finally spoke up. His curiosity must have gotten the better of him because his one and only question was about my little treasure hunt.

"So what do you need to go rooting around in that library for anyway?"

"Oh, you want I hint now, do you? What happened to me being an out-of-towner who knew nothing and was destined to fail."

"Hey, you said all that, not me. I just said you was going to give up is all. They all do," he said matter of factly. "And if you don't wanna tell me fine, I wasn't going to tell you nothing either."

"Good, I don't need your help."

"Good, then we're agreed."

After that, it went back to silence. With Brian, I couldn't here how empty these road were because he was blasting music the entire way, but now all that I could hear was the truck's engine. Eventually, we winded up a dirt road and Barney turned the motor off, getting rid of that sound too. It was eerie, but I could see it, the old cottage, surrounded by farmland.

"Come on, I'll show you where it is," Barney said as he swung himself out of the car. I followed suit, and kept behind him as he shuffled over to the last of the plaques. The first thing I noticed was that the home was surrounded by trees. The man must have loved them, because it appeared that he left them behind wherever he went. It was no surprise that when I got close enough to see it, the final image was of a tree too.

This one showed a tree with wide, horizontal branches, and where a few of the others had point added around the engraved leaves, this one had it added to the trunk and branches. The paint was black and stood out against the metal behind it. I almost commented on it out loud, beginning a sentence, but finishing it before I could get an entire word out. Barney made no comment about my verbal hiccup and continued staring off at his truck, obviously wanting to leave. I began to draw and was soon ready to go.

We got back into the truck, still not saying a word, until once again, just outside of town Barney felt the need to speak up.

"It's just sad, you know." He paused, seemingly waiting for me to respond. I did him that courtesy.

"What is?"

"Most people in this town could tell you about the time they tried to crack the puzzle. Usually it goes that they sat staring at one of them for about half an hour before giving up. You're the first person in a long time who seems to have taken any real interest in them, and you aren't even from around here."

"What's me not being from around here got to do with it?"

"Well it was meant to be a test for his sons to show that they loved this town right? Don't you think it's a little crazy that the only person caring enough isn't even from around here? 'Cause I do. They take this town for granted is all."

I didn't have a response, and Barney seemed happy enough having gotten the words out of his head. It wasn't long before he pulled back into the same parking spot we had left only 20 or so minutes earlier and strolled back inside.

"You have fun in that library now," he told me as he sat back down in his chair at the game. Dee and Mr Brown both smiled at that.

"Looks like you've made a new friend Charlie!" Dee exclaimed, wiggling her eyebrows as Barney simply ignored her.

## Chapter 21

"Oh my god, what did Rex do to you?" So that was my attacker's name. Morgan dropped onto the grass and grabbed my face. She pulled it towards her, taking a closer look. I could already feel the bruise developing. "You look awful, come on, I'll take you back to the diner, and get you some ice."

"Who was that guy, anyway?"

"My ex," she stated exasperated. Her eyes avoided me for a moment before locking with mine again. She sighed and continued. "He's an asshole, but he was never like this."

"No wonder you seem to hate this town so much, guys like that running around." I struggled my way to my feet and brushed myself off. Morgan spryly rose back to standing. "Someone has to do something about that guy. You aren't safe."

"Let's just get you sitting down before you do something you regret. I'll call Chief Barton after." She offered a shoulder to help me walk back out of the park, which I took hesitantly.

The only sound that passed through my lips were moans of pain as I shambled down the street, and the occasional laugh as Morgan tried to cheer me up. As we passed groups of rubbernecking local she whispered in my ear.

"This'll only add fire to Laura's rumors you know. They'll think that Rex is some cartel member or something, and you were trying to take him down."

My laugh came out airy, still winded from the fall. This town was absurd. Everything was blown up to mythical proportions. Everyone's actions were seen through the filter of being larger than life. I yearned to be somewhere else, like I had in my youth, and as I imagined Morgan did. Maybe we wouldn't have to yearn to much longer.

We burst through the door to the diner, ringing the little bell that was attached to it. I waddled over to a booth and fell into it. Carla looked worried, but Morgan placated her, telling her I needed a minute. I was thankful for that. While I appreciated Morgan's help, I didn't need anyone else butting in right now. New, she sent back into the kitchen and emerged with a bag of ice and a glass of water. She walked over and placed them both down on the table. Finally, she place a couple of pills down next to them.

"Take these, you'll feel better." I could tell she wouldn't take no for an answer, not that I would have refused anyway. I took the pills with a gulp of water, then placed the ice tentatively against my cheek.

"Have you eaten since breakfast?" I shook my head. "Okay, what do you want?" With that she slipped into a kinder tone. She was no longer a bossy mother, trying to make sure I took my medicine, but the girl I had met last night. I shrugged and removed the ice bag for a moment to speak.

"No idea, could I have a menu?" In the blink of an eye she was back with a menu. "I'll give you a minute. You look it over, and call me over when you're ready. I have to get back to work, Carla's probably been worked off her feet." Like that, she hurried off again.

I browsed the menu for a moment, looking over all the options. At first I thought a burger, but the thought of opening my mouth wide enough to take a bit of the monster stack of a burger

that was pictured made the side of my face scream at me. Though, in the end I order the burger anyway, deciding I valued my stomach over my face. I motioned for Morgan to come over, and told her what I wanted.

It came out quick and a dug in. The large man out the back sure could make a burger. Thankfully, by the time I began, the painkillers I had been given had kicked in, and my cheek no longer gave me grief. A didn't know exactly what Morgan had given me, but I could feel that it was the good stuff. As I ate, and let the drugs settle in, I began to feel better, if not invincible.

When Morgan came over to collect my plate, I was inflated with false confidence. As she picked up what was left of the meal I had just devoured I spoke. A part of me was screaming not to say it, that I was just embarrassing myself, but that part was no longer in control.

"Hey, when I leave on Monday, do you want to come with me?"

I had said it, and there was no taking it back. She laughed, dismissively at first. She must have realised that it was the pills speaking not me. But then she looked contemplative before speaking semi-seriously.

"I'll think about it." I seriously hoped that she would.

She took the plate, leaving me sitting there alone at the table for I don't know how long. Occasionally Carla would come over and check I was doing okay, before going about her business as usual. By the time Morgan come back, the haze that had descended on me had lifted and I felt a little more sane.

"Well I'm done for the evening, you ready to go?" I check my phone. When had it become early evening?

"Yeah, let's go." I got up, shaky from having been sat down for over an hour. As we walked out the door, I realised I hadn't texted Charlie about the party yet. I paused and hastily sent her the details, before chasing Morgan out the door.

## Chapter 22

I opened to door to the tiny library as far as it would go and squeezed through the gap. I ran my hand over the spines of the books on the shelves as I walked the narrow aisles. A couple of shelves down I found a desk, hard up against a wall. There was a window above the workspace with a beautiful view of Davies Park. I placed my bag down on the table and pulled out my sparse notes before turning to search the shelves.

The books seemed to have no discernible order. Every other library I had been to in my life had some sort of tag attached to the book that told you where it was meant to be, but these had no such luxuries. Instead, the books closer to the desk were the ones that appeared to be most recently used, with the one furthest from it were unused and covered in dust. It meant it would not be an easy job to find what I was looking for.

What was I look for? I thought back on my circuit around Easthedge, and what I had uncovered. Not a lot, I decided. Only a few trees. What were those trees meant to mean? I felt as though the late Stuart Davies had just made those engravings to confuse and bamboozle, a final chance to mess with the living. But I still persisted, if only to prove to the old mayor that I wasn't to be trifled with. I thought of my time in the musty smelling room as a trade, my time for the treasure, and I was going to make sure that Mayor Davies paid out.

I decided to start with the books closest to the desk, hoping that by looking through the titles that others had considered before me would give me some clue. I was looking for anything to do with trees before I realised that a bulk of the books were about such things. It turns out that farming communities are reasonably interested in information about plants, who knew? Eventually I found one that was reasonably new looking and seemed relevant enough and pulled it off the shelf. The title read 'Trees Native to the Midwest'. I took it over to the table and began to flick through.

It didn't take long to find out what the trees I had drawn down were. I moved through the pages not paying much attention, until something jumped out at me. It looked just like the image I had seen in the church, but in the flesh. It was a white oak, the book said. I noted down the name on my drawing, and began to move from page to page with even greater speed, looking for pictures of the other trees I had found. It wasn't long before I had five drawings sitting in front of me, each with a name now scribbled in the bottom corner. In addition to the white oak, I had found a kentucky coffee tree, a juneberry, a red oak and a black gum.

I may have learnt their names, but I still hadn't figured out what to do with them. They appeared to mark the locations, signifying them in some way, but what was I meant to do with that? I stared out my window, at Davies Park and its Juneberry plaque and wondered. What if the treasure was at one of the locations with one of the plaques, and the trees were meant to tell me which one. As it was, the trees were indistinguishable from each other, so there would have to be something to tell me which, to point me in the right direction. I decided I didn't know enough yet, and need more information.

I got up from my chair and walked through the shelves again. This time I looked further from the desk, closer to the door. Back here were all of the ancient books that looked as though

they were going to fall apart at any moment. Among them I discovered exactly what I was looking for. I pulled an old tome off the bookcase, bringing with it a cloud of dust. I coughed as I hauled the book back to the desk.

In small, golden letters the cover said 'Easthedge: 1899-1909'. I hoped my clue would lay inside. I turned the pages with care, unlike the newer book I had paroused a few minutes ago. I was afraid that the pages of the book would fall apart in my hands. Most of the pages contained dry accounts of the events that happened in the town, but occasionally a blurry black and white photo or painting would crop up. It was those that I was looking for.

Every place I had been to on my tour around town was there, even if it looked a little different. The park was missing its statue, and the schoolhouse was a single building, but they were still in essence what they were now, an irrevocable part of Easthedge. I thought about the landmarks I had seen, and suddenly wondered why they were picked at all. The mayor had wished his sons to know his town, and so made them travel around these places, that were at its core. But it seemed he had missed one. The building that was pictured the most in this written history was the very building I stood in, yet it contained no clue.

Perhaps the fact that it was missing was a clue in itself. I got up abruptly and squeezed back out of the library into the hall proper. Without saying a word to my friends who were finally finishing up their game I rushed outside. I began to circle the building, looking for anything like the clues I had seen all day, but found nothing. I reached the back of the building, where a small courtyard extended. I stood there a moment staring at its center. There stood a Juneberry tree. I looked over in the direction of the park just down the road. Could it be so close?

And then my phone beeped. The treasure had waited a century to be found, maybe it could wait another night.

## Chapter 23

I held what was left of the bag of ice against my face while we walked. Most of it had melted and was dripping down my arm, but it still felt cool against my skin, so continued. We strolled back towards Morgan's house, so that she could get out of her uniform before we headed off to the party. My stride was still a little wonky, but I could keep up.

We got back to her house and she let us in. We wandered in and I found myself in a room other than the bedroom for the first time. I fell into the lounge's extremely soft couch and felt it try to absorb me.

"Feel free to hang out while I get ready. Just be careful, half of this stuff is Margaret and she'll flip if it breaks." I suppose I wasn't quite back at full bodily control after my run in with Rex, and she could tell.

She ducked out of the room, leaving me to examine it from the purview of the couch. Where Morgan's room and the hallway leading to it had been covered in posters, this room looked rather normal. The walls were covered with faded babe blue wallpaper, and that was only covered by the occasional photo. I could see the outlines of people from where I sat, but I couldn't make out detail. I extricated myself from my seat and sauntered forward to get a closer look.

They were family photos. The first one I stood before showed a young Morgan and Margaret standing in front of an elderly couple. Even through the wrinkles you could tell that they were the two girls grandparents. They were the spitting image of their grandmother. I peered ever closer at the image of Morgan in her youth. Her hair was dirty blonde in the photo, just like her sister's, rather than the jet black that it was now. I walked away, to the next photo on the wall.

The next frame showed me a young couple, happy and in love. They couldn't have been older than me. Behind them I could make out what could only be Easthedge's main street.

"Looking into my past, are you?" Morgan said, emerging from the doorway in a beautiful red dress that ended at her knees. She had a smirk on her face.

"I guess I am." I pointed at the photo I now stood in front of and said, "Are these your parents?"

She walked over and plucked the frame from the wall, gazing deeply into it. Where it had once sat I could now see an outline in the wallpaper. It was still unfaded, it's stripes a vivid blue, unlike the pale ones that surrounded it.

"Yeah, they are. I don't know why Margaret keeps all of these. Everyone else is long gone. They lived their entire lives in this town, and they died here too. It's just a sorry reminder of what we have to look forward to." Despite her gloomy speech and despite herself she smiled at the picture in her hands before putting it back on the wall.

"You don't have to be stuck here you know," I said, reiterating what I had said in the diner in my sorry state. But there was a difference, then I had been high on painkillers, and now I was just my normal self. I made all the difference in the world and she knew it. Where she had only considered it in jest before she spoke with more seriousness this time.

"As much as it is what I have always wanted, I can't help but think of what I'd lose. What would I be trading away in leaving? My sister, every friend I've ever had. I'm not saying that my time in Easthedge has been great, after all it's not the most welcoming place to a rebellious teenage girl, but not all the memories were bad."

We both stood there for a moment, her thinking and me struggling to come up with something to say. After a moment she turned around and walked into the kitchen, opening the fridge. She pulled out a bottle of wine and brought it back over. The look on her face showed that she had pushed that contemplative side back down, and was back to bubbly. I wasn't sure that the change was a good thing, but at least I knew what to do with this version of her.

"Figured we both need this." She looked me up and down. "You definitely look like you need this. You look like someone died." I straightened up and took the bottle from her, pretending to look at the label.

"I think you are definitely right. Are you ready, 'cause the quicker we go, the quicker we can get into this."

She laughed, and I began to feel more at ease. "Yeah, I'm ready, let's go."

I followed her out of the house, past the posters on the walls, looking down at me. I looked at the faces on them as I passed, the various people from the town who had been superimposed onto them. I looked into a drawn Morgan's eyes. She wanted an adventure, hopefully that's what tonight would be.

## Chapter 24

I ran back inside the town hall, phone still in hand. The message said that the party was a short walk from the town center in a field behind an abandoned farmhouse. I looked it up and figured out how to get there as I retrieved my bag and notes from the small library. Having calmed down a little from my revelation, I managed to walk back into the town hall's main room this on my way to leave.

"What was all that about?" Dee asked as I now headed towards them. She looked curious as a cat, contorting her back so that she could see me despite being in a chair facing the wrong way.

"I..." My eyes darted to Barney, sitting there looking everywhere I wasn't, and I closed my mouth.

"Save it, I don't want to know what you think you've found," he said in a huff.

"Ah, found out a little something, huh? Well let us know how it goes, won't you Charlie."

"Sure, but it will have to wait for tomorrow."

"Perfectly fine Charlotte," Mr Brown interjected. "We're done her for the evening anyway, but I'm sure that we will see you around in the morning." He stood up and began to clear the tables around him.

"Well then I will see you all tomorrow, have a good night."

"Yes, have fun at your party!" Dee called after me, stopping me in my tracks.

"How do you know about that?" I asked.

"I'm old, not dead, I can tell when the kiddies around here are planning something."

"If you think you know where the treasure is, you should be dealing with that, not wasting your time on some party," Barney spat out.

"Oh quiet you. Don't listen to this old coot, have fun at your party, after all it's been a century already, it can wait a night." It was like Dee could read my mind. With that I was waved off out the door.

The map told me that to get to the party, I could cut through Davies Park, and I was happy for the opportunity. I walked through its greenery as the sun set, glancing all around me, sure that riches lay just below my feet. It could wait for morning I kept telling myself, I needed to go to this party, if only to see how Brian had been doing.

A few other young adults were scattered over the park, walking in the same direction as me. I figured that they must be headed in the same direction as me, so I put away my phone and began to follow them instead. They all walked along in clusters, chatting amongst themselves. Suddenly I felt very alone. I had spent the day bouncing around town and talking to a bunch of old people. While I was happy with the company I had made since coming to Easthedge, I suddenly felt rather out of place.

As we closed in on the party, the groups began to merge. Two people walking together suddenly became ten. While the crowds had closed in around me, it didn't change the fact that I didn't know anyone, and as they joked to each other it felt as though there was a wall between

us. I could see where we were all headed now, the glow of a bonfire in the distance. I would feel better when I had met up with Brian, I assured myself.

Suddenly, a man clipped my shoulder as he walked past me, grumbling for me to get out of the way as he did so. He had gelled up brown hair and wore all black. I might have mistaken him for Brian if it hadn't been for his voice, so full of vinegar. After that I felt something else on my shoulder, but this time it was a hand laid softly upon it. I turned to see a young woman in a fluffy green jumper move up next to me.

"Sorry about him. Rex is sort of the town sociopath." The girl said, still looking at the wake of the angry man. "I'm Hannah by the way, you must be the out-of-towner." I was a little dazed still, having gone from being on my own with my thoughts to extremely jostled, but I was happy to now have some form of connection to the crowd I found myself in.

"Yeah, that's me, I'm Charlie. And just before you ask, no, whatever Laura has been saying about me isn't true. None of it."

"Well that's a shame, but I'm really not surprised considering that I've heard about five different accounts of what you're meant to be doing her in town."

"So what do you do around here, Hannah?"

"Not a lot really. I work over on one of the farms. And what does bring you to town Charlie?"

"It's not a particularly interesting story. My car just broke down, so I'm sort of stuck here for another day or so."

"We'll I hope you've been enjoying yourself."

"I am. Much more than I thought I would."

We continued to chatter idly as we made it to the party proper. All up it must have been a little under a hundred people. Everyone who still had any hint of youth about them was there. The majority of the party formed a ring around the bonfire, which kept everyone warm. Around that ring, there was the occasional keg of beer, and a thicker looking kid working a grill. Though it had only just gotten dark a few people were already sloshed, and had made their way outside the circle to hid whatever deeds they were doing in the dark.

As we made our way into the circle I saw another couple of people hollering to us to come over. I was thankful to see that it was Brian stood next to Morgan. I let Hannah head over to find the rest of her friends while I went to find out what Brian had been up to this afternoon.

## Chapter 25

Walking through the crowd at the party felt different than going down the street in the middle of town. There was still the whispering and he looks, but it didn't feel like it was out of suspicion. The rumors flowed between them not out of malice but out of trying to understand. I was an outsider, new and interesting. I was something to be studied. Before I got any chance to try and mingle with this curious crowd Morgan spotted something off in the distance. She began to wave, and when I figured out what she was waving at I waved too.

Charlie made her way over and we began to talk, yelling to hear ourselves over the crowd. "So how goes the treasure hunting?" I said jokingly, expecting an equally jokey response. Instead I received a smirk that covered her entire face.

"Better than you think." With that she patted her bag.

"Well then we should be celebrating, shouldn't we? Let's get a drink." While is wasn't really in the mood for revelling, I figured that I should play that part. The fact that I wanted the drink anyway helped.

"No need to hit the kegs yet, we still have the wine." Morgan offered helpfully. I had forgotten I was even carrying it. Now it was plucked out of my hands and uncorked it with a pop. Morgan held the bottle in the air and offered a toast.

"To new friends, and treasures untold!" Neither Charlie or I had anything to clink against the bottle held aloft, so we simply bumped our fists against it. It did not provide the satisfying click glasses would have provided, but it was good enough. Morgan took a swig then offered it to Charlie. She did the same, this time offering the bottle to me. I took my mouthful in turn. I couldn't say that it had a particular taste, but it had a warmth that was welcome after the walk, even in the presence of the bonfire.

"And what about you two, huh? Haven't seen you since... when did you get that?" Charlie leaned forward to get a closer look at my face. "Did someone hit you?"

"Sure did. Some guy named Rex, a real piece of work." She showed signs of recognition as I said his name.

"Did you say Rex. I had run in with the guy on my way here. Not a long one, but still" She looked at Morgan once she finished speaking. I peeked at her too, out of the corner of my eyes, seeing the same expression that Charlie saw. It was a guilty look, but not without fear. Charlie pushed herself between Morgan and I, taking her by the arm.

"Me and Morgan need to talk for a second Brian. I'm sure you understand. I've barely met her, and you two have already spent so much time together." This just added confusion to the list of emotions readable on Morgan's face. Yet she spoke up.

"Yeah, you go mingle Brian, we won't be long. It will be a good chance for you to make some new friends." With that, Charlie was pulling her away, outside of the circle that had formed under the warmth of the fire. The contrast between how bright it was where I stood, and the darkness outside the circle meant that I lost them almost immediately. Now I was the one who was confused. I had thankfully been left with the bottle still in my hand, so I took another long gulp. Even when things were going my way they weren't.

I looked around the crowd, and began to take in the groups that had formed around me. While they occasionally intermingled, with everyone knowing everyone, you could tell where allegiances lay. I began to make my way around the bonfire, passing the various groups.

A group of men, obviously farmer's son's destined to one day run the farm themselves stood near the edge of the party, trying to show off their masculinity by staying as cold as possible. The opposite of these were the stoners, sat as close to the bonfire as possible. They were passing a joint around, but those who weren't currently holding it were poking at the fire with sticks. A group of preppy kids straddled the line of being just close enough to the fire to keep warm without getting too close for comfort. They wore what must have been their best church clothes. If their families were expecting them to show up to the chapel in the morning the church was going to end up covered in mud. It was like all the cliques I knew from high school had been aged up, and placed in front of me. I suppose that the fact that the town's small size meant that the friends you made in high school were your friends for life.

In my observation, I hadn't even noticed that I was drifting dangerously close to the punk group. Charlie had said that Rex was here, and if he was part of any of these groups it was that one. I quickly ducked into the nearest other group that I could, attempting to dodge another encounter with the crazed kid. I found myself in a circle full of people who looked extremely good for how badly they were dressed. I had found the geeks.

They seemed to not care about fashion in the slightest, and had thrown on whatever they thought looked cool at the time. They pulled it off through sheer lack of care. Where the other groups always looked like they were trying to prove how cool they were to the others by their posturing, this one did the opposite. I was glad I had joined this little amalgamation, because they were exactly the sort to let me in when I squirmed to get out of sight.

I waited until there was a lull in the conversation, to focus on what I was going to say when it happened to really hear what they were talking about. Finally my chance to introduce myself came.

"Um, hey, I'm Brian and I'm not from around here. It's nice to meet you all," I said with zero tact. Every other time I had introduced myself in this town had been one on one. Now that I was in front of a crowd of people I didn't know, I was nervous. My nerves showed, but luckily it didn't matter because I got a response anyway.

"Hey Brian, I'm Hannah. I met your friend Charlie earlier, we walked over together." Thankfully Charlie had better social skills than me.